

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: With Friends Like This, Who Needs Enemies?

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 12:11-13:1

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Next Lord's Day we will complete our six-month journey through the book of 2 Corinthians. As I mentioned when we began, this has been my first time teaching through the book, so I have been learning along with you. Probably because the book's primary focus has been on Paul's personal trials and tribulations as a church planter and pastor, this has been an emotional journey for me. It has shown me areas where I have fallen fall short; at the same time it has encouraged me to know that he went through most of the struggles I have been through and far more. I hope you have enjoyed the journey and have grown as a result of it.

Nearly everyone seems to like a good courtroom drama. Some of the most popular programs on TV over the years have involved prosecutors and defense attorneys going at one another and trying to convict or exonerate the accused. The book of 2 Corinthians in some ways reminds me of just such a setting. Throughout the first eleven chapters Paul himself has been the one on trial. His accusers are the false teachers who gained a foothold in the Church after Paul left to plant churches in other cities. The witnesses for the prosecution, sadly, are some of the members of the church at Corinth, who take the stand and agree with the false teachers that Paul didn't measure up as a pastor. Paul is abandoned to defend himself and his Gospel against multitudinous charges.

To the charge that he exploited the church he flat pleads "not guilty." To the charge that he didn't accept money because his ministry wasn't worth anything, he vehemently argues that he just didn't want to be a burden to them. To the charge that he was a lousy preacher, he willingly grants that his oratory is not world-class, but argues that his content is solid, which is far more important. To the charge that he was fickle because he changed his travel plans, he makes it clear that he did it specifically for their benefit. To the charge that he was lacking in credentials, he argues that his credentials are actually superior to those of the so-called "super-apostles" –not in terms of titles and degrees and human standards of success but in terms of suffering and persecution and humiliation, all areas where Jesus' own credentials stood out. And to the charge that he didn't have visions and revelations to bolster his claims to authority he argues, as we saw last week, "I experienced a vision that surpasses any these false teachers have claimed—I actually went to Paradise and back." He just hadn't brought it up before because it was not something he wanted to brag about.

In the middle of chapter 12, however, there seems to me to be a shift in the focus of this courtroom drama. Instead of playing defense, the Apostle takes the offense. And instead of attacking the false teachers directly, he takes on the witnesses, the Corinthian church members themselves, and says in effect, "You are the ones who should really be on trial. The false teachers are guilty, of course, but what do you expect from spiritual predators? You, however, should have known better, so you have the greater guilt. I led you to Christ, I disciplined you, I loved you, and then when I left to go plant other churches you turned and gave your allegiance to those who undermined me and the very Gospel I preached to you."

As we examine this section I don't want us to treat this as just a history lesson. I suppose it *is*

valuable to learn what happened in first-century Corinth, but that's not by itself going to change anyone's life. Instead I want us to think about how this passage applies to our own exercise of spiritual leadership and to our own attitudes toward those in spiritual leadership over us.

Friends, there is a tightrope that God asks us to walk. On the one hand, we must not be gullible, blindly following spiritual leaders no matter where they lead us or what they teach us. On the other hand, we must not be so critical of them that they become discouraged or feel defeated in their efforts to lead and feed God's people.

Scores of pastors in the Free Church leave the ministry prematurely every year, and the same thing happens in our sister denominations. Frankly, some of them probably need to quit; for one reason or another they either don't have the gifts necessary for the job or they have lost their passion for it. But there are many faithful shepherds who have been chewed up and spit out by ungrateful congregations or denigrated because they don't measure up to the flashy leaders in other congregations or in the media.

But please understand that I don't want this sermon to be just a defense of pastors; I'm not asking that every Sunday be National Pastor's Day. This passage speaks as well to our attitudes toward elders and ABF leaders and Sunday School teachers, and even parents, really anyone in spiritual leadership over us. They, too, can become discouraged and bail out.

You can grasp where I am going this morning if you just look at the outline:

Paul's "friends" put him in an impossible situation. (12:11)

Paul's "friends" adopted worldly views of spiritual leadership. (12:12-14)

Paul's "friends" withheld their love from him. (12:15)

Paul's "friends" alleged that he was corrupt.¹ (12:16-18)

Paul's "friends" need to repent. (12:19-21)

As we proceed, please ask yourself, "Am I being a loyal, godly friend to those who have been assigned spiritual leadership over me?"

Paul's "friends" put him in an impossible situation. (12:11)

Verse 11: "I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles, even though I am nothing.'" Paul regrets that he's had to waste precious time and effort defending himself. He feels like a fool for sharing the account of his trip to Paradise and back. But the disloyalty of this church drove him to it; they have put him squarely on the horns of a dilemma. If he doesn't fight back, the false teachers will solidify their position and the church may go down the tubes spiritually; if he does fight back, he is accused of being defensive and overly sensitive.

May I dare paraphrase the last half of verse eleven as I think Paul might have written it today to some Christian audiences: "I am God's chosen Apostle and I ought to have been appreciated by you, but instead you're falling head-over-heels after Benny Hinn and T. D. Jakes and Joel Osteen." Or, if he were writing to a strictly evangelical audience, he might even have written: "I as your pastor ought to have been appreciated by you, but instead your praise and gratitude go to

Max Lucado, and Chuck Swindoll, and John MacArthur.”

My point is not that these men, at least the last three, have appointed themselves as super-apostles—only that Christians sometimes treat them as such. Lucado and Swindoll and MacArthur are wonderful gifts to God’s church, but they should not gain our loyalty at the expense of the shepherds who slug it out in the muck of the sheepfold week in and week out. If you’re one of those who has become enamored with today’s superstars among the clergy, just ask yourself how that individual is going to help you the next time you have a crisis in your marriage or your parent dies or your child gets into drugs. Do you think he’s going to call you up and pray with you on the phone or come to your house and hug you while you cry? No way—he couldn’t even if he wanted to, but your small group leader may, or your ABF leader, or one of your pastors, or mom and dad.

This sermon is not a personal plea for praise and affirmation; I have received far more than I deserve, and I feel very much appreciated by this congregation. Rather it’s a plea for each of us to ask ourselves the question, “Who is faithfully ministering to the deepest needs of my heart and my family, and am I showing loyalty and appreciation for their contribution?”

Next Paul addresses the basic reason why Paul’s friends have put him in this impossible situation:

Paul’s friends adopted worldly views of spiritual leadership. (12:12-14)

Spiritual leadership has been a common theme in the book of 2 Corinthians. The Corinthian believers were putting great stress on oratory, good looks, wealth, visions, and revelations—all worldly measures of spiritual leadership. Paul addresses the issue once more in verses 12-14:

The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you.

In last week’s text we found Paul minimizing the importance of supernatural visions and revelations. In verse 6 he said, “I refrain (from bragging about supernatural experiences) so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.” In effect he says, “My life and my preaching is what I want to be judged by.” Nevertheless, Paul does acknowledge here that there is a place for signs, wonders and miracles in God’s plan—they constitute the marks of a true apostle.

Anyone can claim a vision or say, “God told me so,” and there’s no way to prove it one way or another. But signs, wonders, and miracles are verifiable. Either someone is instantaneously healed or he isn’t. Either a dead man is raised or he isn’t. When Jesus and the Apostles performed miracles and wonders and signs, there was no question but that God had shown up and done something astounding.

Oh, I know there are many claiming signs and wonders today, but isn't it troubling to you that they always seem to specialize in gastro-intestinal disorders and hip pain and headaches? Why don't they ever do teeth, or eyes? Why don't the alleged miracle workers today restore limbs or heal quadriplegics, or cure Alzheimer's? Why is it always something unverifiable?

The marks of a true Apostle were first-class miracles, not sleight-of-hand tricks. And in calling these "the marks of an apostle," I think Paul is suggesting that we shouldn't expect these things once the apostolic age is past. It's not that God *can't* do miracles in our scientific world today; He can do a miracle anytime He chooses, and I'm convinced that once in a while He allows a first-class miracle for His own glory and to keep us from becoming too cynical. But I have serious doubt that *anyone* today has the marks of an apostle on his ministry, because I don't believe anyone today has the office of Apostle. Even in the early church the spiritual gift of miracles is described in the plural ("gifts" of miracles), implying that it is not a gift anyone possesses permanently but rather something God gives in the time and place of His own choosing and to whomever He wants.

Did you note that little phrase at the end of verse 12? "The things that mark an apostle were done among you *with great perseverance*." Why does he add that? What is his point? Well, just as his opponents couldn't match his ability to do signs, wonders, and miracles, so they didn't have his staying power. Yes, he had performed miracles from time to time, but between those exhilarating experiences were years of unrelenting effort against massive odds through which he endured. The latter is as much a sign of his faithfulness as the former, perhaps even more.

But what is Paul's point in even discussing signs, wonders, and miracles? He is saying, "You saw the marks of an apostle in my life, along with perseverance. You saw everything any other church saw and a lot more than most. In fact, the only thing you missed out on was that your pastor was not a burden to you." And then he says something that is literally dripping with irony, even sarcasm: "Forgive me this wrong!" Or to paraphrase it, "Please excuse me for not taking advantage of you, for not ripping you off, for not exploiting you financially. I should have known better!"

But quickly Paul recovers from his indulgence in irony and resorts to blatant honesty in verse 14: "I will not change; I *still* refuse to be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you." This is still one of the major lines of demarcation between a worldly view of spiritual leadership and a godly view, between true men of God and false teachers: are they pursuing God's people or are they pursuing the possessions of God's people? There's a huge temptation to pursue the possessions, and a man of God must resist.

Let me share a very fresh personal illustration with you. Last summer I was invited to speak out of town as a favor to a friend. I could have flown, but airfare to that city was expensive and I didn't want to run up their expenses, so I drove—1000 miles round-trip. I stayed with friends so as not to cause extra expense. I spent two full days there, speaking and attending three major functions. A few days after I got home I received a thank-you note, along with a check that didn't even cover my expenses.

I was hurt, and after waiting a few weeks I wrote a letter and as diplomatically as possible I explained that my expenses alone had been more than he had paid me, to say nothing of an honorarium. But I made the mistake of showing it to my wife. (If you don't know this dear lady well, you're missing out big-time). She said to me, "Mike, I think you should let it go." She didn't say so, but my suspicion is that she was thinking, "There have been many times when you've been paid a lot more than you're worth, and you didn't give the money back." So I went to Pastor Phil and talked the situation over with him. He agreed with Jan.

On top of that I was just beginning my study for this sermon series on 2 Corinthians. Even early on I couldn't help but notice how often Paul made a point of not allowing money to interfere with ministry. With Jan, Phil, and the Scriptures all on the same side, I tossed the letter and let it go.

Just recently I was in that city again, and the same man handed me an envelope and told me to read it later. When I got home the next day I opened the letter, and there was another generous check along with a very nice letter of gratitude for my ministry in his life. Without me saying a thing he had corrected the situation, and the truth was pressed home to my heart that God is faithful! I do not have to strive; I do not have to go to bat for myself; I can just trust Him. My job as a minister of the Gospel is to pursue people for God, not their possessions.

Paul wraps up his point by adding a statement that the young people here this morning will love: "After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." Please understand this is *not* a categorical statement that absolves adult children from all responsibility for aged parents. I think Paul is speaking of small children, teens, and perhaps young single women, and he is simply stating the obvious—decent parents don't exploit their children; they cheerfully accept the responsibility to rear them, educate them, and establish them as self-sufficient adults.

Paul is the spiritual parent of the Corinthian church. As such he refused any financial support from them but instead sought his support from established churches. Once they were on their feet then they would be able to support their own pastor, but he would not ask them to support him during their formative stage. He refused to look at them as an opportunity to feather his own nest. But sadly they had such a worldly view of spiritual leadership that they interpreted his kindness as weakness. And they chose leaders who sucked them dry all the while these leaders got richer and richer. I guess I will never understand how so many people can be duped by the super-apostles of the media today, even after the secular media exposes their extravagant lifestyles. Thousands of poor people just continue to pour good money after bad, enabling these hucksters to continue their scams.

Paul's friends withheld their love from him. (12:15)

Verse 15 and 16: "So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?" Paul affirms such love for the Corinthians that he would give them everything he had, including his very life. Without his efforts there would

have been no church in Corinth. Without his teaching and his discipleship and his patient encouragement, many of them would never have survived the persecution from their pagan families. Simple courtesy, to say nothing of loyalty, would demand that they show some appreciation and gratitude. But no, instead they were asking in effect, “What have you done for me lately?” And since Paul was off planting other churches and obviously couldn’t be in two places at once, he could not meet their demands.

There is serious pathos in Paul’s voice as he asks, “If I love you more, will you love me less?” Ever been in a relationship like that? Ever felt that the more you gave the less you got? That’s exactly how Paul feels, but he never stops loving them.

Paul’s friends alleged that he was corrupt. (12:16-18)

Listen to verses 16-18:

Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course?

It seems that a particularly nasty accusation was making the rounds in Corinth. Some were apparently saying, “OK, maybe Paul didn’t line his pockets when he was here in Corinth. He was much too sly to do such a thing. Rather he arranged for his deputies, his surrogates like Titus to do the dirty work for him. He was able to come off as Mr. Clean while his henchmen took care of the sleazy side of things.” In other words, Paul was allegedly like the Congressman on the take who would never accept a payoff from Jack Abramoff but sends an intermediary to collect the cash.

This was pure fantasy, and Paul says so in several ways. First, he asserts once again, “I have not been a burden to you. I haven’t taken money in the past and I’m not going to take it now.” But then he again employs irony and sarcasm: “I am such a crafty, sneaky fellow that I pulled the wool over all your eyes. You profess to be so wise and knowledgeable and yet I was able to pick your pockets in broad daylight!” Then he states how absurd these rumors really are, for Titus and the unnamed brother who appeared earlier in chapter 8 behaved every bit as honorably as he.

I asked the question in my title this morning, “With friends like this, who needs enemies?” This church should have been among Paul’s strongest supporters. He spent more time there than in any church; he wrote more letters to them than to any church; he sent his best-trained young pastors there to help. What a tragic result for all his efforts! But do we ever treat our spiritual mentors the same way? Are we ever ungrateful, hyper-critical, and completely unrealistic in our expectations of them?

In the last paragraph of chapter 12 Paul states the obvious:

Paul’s friends need to repent. (12:19-21)

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

1. They need to repent of their misjudging of Paul's motives. Some of the Corinthian believers have been listening to Paul and apparently thinking, "He's being so defensive; he can't take any criticism; he's so self-absorbed." No, says, Paul, everything I've said has God as my witness and everything I've done has the goal of building you up in the faith. His self-defense is ultimately for the defense of the church and even the Gospel. They need to repent of their questioning of his motives.

2. They need to repent of the sins that have destroyed the church's unity. Paul expresses a fear in verse 20—a fear for what he might find when he arrives at Corinth for his third visit. The sins he mentions are the principal sins he addressed in the book of 1 Corinthians, and isn't it interesting that they all have to do with relationship conflict: Quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder. This church is tearing itself apart, and if healing is going to happen, they need to repent.

3. They need to repent of the sins which have polluted their moral lives and threaten to humiliate and grieve Paul himself. The church at Corinth had not only been guilty of sins that produced relationship conflict; they had also been guilty of immorality. You will recall the high-profile case of a man who was involved in an illicit relationship with his step-mother in 1 Cor. 5, a sin which Paul claims even rank pagans would be embarrassed about. And the church for a long time ignored the issue, treating it as a personal matter, not a corporate issue that was undermining the integrity of the entire church. Apparently there were other cases of immorality for which individuals had not repented.

Paul expresses fear (v. 21) that God will humble *him* because of *their* failure to repent. After all, he is the founder of the church, so he bears some responsibility if the church fails. It's as though he were pleading with his friends this way: "My brothers and sisters, I have a stake in your success or failure. If you continue to follow these false teachers and continue in your unrepentant ways, I must face the fact that I didn't do enough to prevent it. At the very least it causes me great grief." I quote from J. Philip Arthur:

Do you know what a burden spiritual leaders carry? When there is sin in a church, or division, or a lack of appetite for prayer or evangelism, when love of the brethren is cold and flabby, no true leader can absolve himself from a share of the responsibility. How easy to distance oneself from all that is not right, to convey with subtle hints and signs that, whoever else might be at fault, we are not! May God save us all from the self-satisfied attitude that murmurs, "Things are not right round here, but

don't blame me. I'm hard-working, prayerful, zealous, hospitable and have a heart for souls. If everybody else was like me this church would flourish."

Thankfully Paul didn't take that attitude at all.

Conclusion: If you were on the jury that was hearing the Apostle Paul present the evidence against his "friends" in the church at Corinth, what kind of verdict would you hand down? He has demonstrated that loyalty was conspicuous by its absence. The church was too easily impressed by flashy showmanship and too prone to overlook less spectacular but more valuable qualities of spiritual leadership. They were much too willing to believe false accusations about the Apostle and to attribute evil motives to him. They evaded responsibility rather than accepting it.

I think this whole passage is a challenge for us to examine two questions: (1) What kind of spiritual leaders are we in the areas of influence where God has placed us, whether at church or home or somewhere else. And (2) how are we treating those whom God has put in spiritual leadership over us? This is a serious issue to God.

i. I have borrowed this outline largely from J. Philip Arthur's *Strength in Weakness*.