

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: Spiritual Authority Is for Building Up, Not Tearing Down

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 13:1-14

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Please turn this morning to the last chapter of the book of 2 Corinthians as we wrap up our six-month study of this powerful letter from the hand of the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth. Please stand with me as I read God's Word:

This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

As is often the case in Paul's letters, he ends this one by summarizing his overall theme and then writing a few postscripts. The overall theme, of course, is the defense of his authority, his ministry, and the Gospel that was entrusted to him against the concerted attacks of the false teachers who managed to gain the upper hand in the church after Paul left. The particular focus of this last chapter seems to me to be spiritual authority. When God assigns someone to be in a position of authority in His Church, what does that involve? What are the privileges and what are the responsibilities?

Spiritual authority involves church discipline. (13:1-4)

When God gives authority to any individual, whether to a parent over a home, or a pastor over a church, or a teacher over a class, inherent in that assignment is the responsibility of discipline. I'm not talking about making people sit up, keep quiet, and raise their hands if they have to go to the bathroom. I'm talking about *spiritual* discipline, i.e. convincing our charges of the importance of obedience to the commandments of God and taking corrective action when they are disobedient. Overt sin simply cannot be ignored in a Christian family or in the family of God. If there are rebellious attitudes and blatant immorality, it must be addressed and dealt with or the

entire family or organization will suffer for it. As an apostle and as a pastor, one of Paul's duties was to call sin "sin," to rebuke those who participated in it, and to protect the spiritual life of the church.

By the way, why is church discipline important? I think there are three basic reasons: First, sin brings dishonor on the name of Christ. When Christians live openly in contradiction to the teachings of Christ, that prevents other people from taking the claims of Christ seriously. Ray Stedman writes, "I was driving down the freeway the other day and a car cut in front of me, almost driving me off the road, then it cut in ahead of the car in front of me. I noticed a bumper sticker on it that said, 'The difference in me is Jesus.'"ⁱ Stedman was not impressed; how much less the pagans around him!

Second, sin brings the gospel into disrepute. The Gospel means "good news" and refers primarily to the good news that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again to save us from our sin. If a professing Christian's lifestyle cannot be distinguished from that of an unbeliever, that's a pretty poor argument for the claim that the Gospel changes lives. And third, sin brings dishonor on the church itself. If a community of believers tolerates open sin in their fellowship, they forfeit any spiritual credibility. This is true whether they are tolerating blatant immorality or disunity—both of which were rampant in Corinth.

Paul had visited Corinth on two occasions—once to plant the church, a process that took 18 months, and again later to try to deal with some of the conflicts that were wracking the church and destroying its testimony. The second visit was not a pleasant one; it had been a bruising, stressful time during which one of the leaders had apparently openly rebuked Paul, while the rest of the church failed to come to his defense. Now he is planning a third and final visit, and he warns them in advance that he will not spare those who sinned earlier. He is going to confront the evil doers and call them to repentance. But he is not going to be unfair; that seems to be the point of his opening announcement: "This will be my third visit to you. 'Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'"

1. Church discipline is limited to verifiable situations. These words are a quotation from Deuteronomy and contain one of the cornerstones of Jewish legal philosophy. No defendant should be convicted without the unanimous testimony of at least two, ideally three, witnesses. Here's the rationale: it is not difficult to imagine one person having a personal grudge against another. If that person can put on a convincing performance, he may actually persuade a judge or jury to convict an individual on the strength of his testimony alone. But that would lend itself quickly to miscarriage of justice. So the Mosaic law laid down the principle of safety in numbers. The testimony of any witness must be corroborated.

Jesus reaffirmed this principle in Matthew 18:15-20:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses

to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Here the same principle is being used not for a courtroom setting to convict someone but for conflict resolution in the church. The value of dual testimony is seen in two ways: it adds weight upon the conscience of the guilty party, and it protects him from unsubstantiated attacks. In other words, if he's guilty, the additional witnesses will establish the matter; if he's not guilty, the lack of additional witnesses will help exonerate him.

But can't a single witness be honest and accurate? Yes, but the law would rather see an occasional guilty person exonerated than an occasional innocent person convicted. Therefore it required that no one should have to defend himself before the church and face the possibility of censure or even excommunication merely on the say-so of one individual.

So why does Paul mention this principle of requiring two or three witnesses here in 2 Corinthians 13? He wants them to know that while the wheels of church discipline have been set in motion, but he is not going to charge into Corinth on his white horse and take out everyone who has offended him. He will not use this as an opportunity to settle personal scores. Rather he will comply with the procedures set forth in the Mosaic Law and confirmed by Jesus Himself. Any nervous church members can rest assured that any charges he brings against them will have to be confirmed by at least two people.

2. Church discipline should be preceded by warning. Paul isn't going to stand up in the Sunday morning service and just start calling out names. Rather he is going to give the guilty plenty of warning. He has already warned them once—on his second visit. Now he is warning them a second time in this letter: “I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others.” He has been patient and long-suffering, as God is patient and long-suffering. But if there is no improvement in the behavior and attitude of the congregation by the time he arrives, someone is going to regret it.

I think the application of this principle today would be that all of us should go to our brothers and sisters in Christ and warn them when we first see their lives veering off from the path of holiness. We should follow that up with other loving warnings. Church discipline should only be a last resort.

3. Church discipline is Christ's work *through* the spiritual leader. Paul realizes that bringing the congregation at Corinth back in line with spiritual truth and holiness of behavior is not ultimately his responsibility; it is the work of Christ speaking through him. That seems to be the message of verse 3: “You are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. “He (Christ) is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.” I think of the first case of spiritual discipline that is recorded following the establishment of the Church on the Day of Pentecost—the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. I would say that event demonstrates pretty clearly that Christ is not weak in dealing with His church.

In case you're not familiar with the story, Ananias and Sapphira were a couple in the Jerusalem church who owned some property. When they saw that Barnabas received recognition for selling

a piece of property and giving the proceeds to the poor, they decided to do the same thing, apparently desiring the same recognition. Only they just gave part of the money while pretending to give it all. The Apostle Peter confronted them each separately, and they both lied about it. In fact, Peter accused them of lying both to man and to God, and both were struck dead on the spot.

Yes, indeed, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 13, “Christ is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.” He is not One to be trifled with, nor are His apostles to be trifled with. If they are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through Paul, they’d better be careful what they are asking for.

The power of church discipline is, of course, subject to abuse and therefore it must be subject to safeguards. It must follow the biblical guidelines laid down in Matt. 18 and elsewhere, and it must be used only in areas of the Christian life that are clearly governed by Scripture. There have been church leaders down through the years who have tried to control the lives of church members in regard to choosing marriage partners, career choice, and lifestyle issues. That is inappropriate. The Scriptures give a great deal of freedom to the individual within the moral boundaries laid out in Scripture—freedom to worship when he chooses, freedom to marry whom he wants (only in the Lord), freedom to choose his own diet, freedom to handle his own finances, and many other areas.

In verse 4 Paul anticipates an objection, namely that he lacks the presence and power of Christ and therefore he shouldn’t be claiming that Christ speaks through him. Listen to his response: “For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you.” At times Jesus actually appeared to be weak, especially at His crucifixion, but that shouldn’t fool anyone. Weakness was a conscious choice. In fact, when Peter tried to rescue Him with a weapon, Jesus told him,

Put your sword back in its place... Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way? (Matthew 26:52-54)

Likewise, if Paul appears weak at times and unimpressive, they should not interpret that as a lack of authority. He speaks for Christ and he lives by God’s power—but his goal is to serve, not to impress.

Spiritual authority encourages self-examination. (5, 6)

Twice in verse 5 Paul urges the Corinthians to examine themselves and test themselves. What is his point? I think clearly he would prefer not to come to the church in a spirit of judgment and discipline. But the only thing that can prevent that is if the people will judge themselves. “If you take care of it,” he implies, “I won’t have to.” How much better that will be for everyone.

But then he adds something that has a disturbing tone to it: “Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” A believer is defined as someone in whom Christ lives. Paul expressed it in Col. 1:27 as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In Galatians 2:20 he adds, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” But here in verse 5 Paul is clearly

encouraging professing Christians to ask themselves the question: “Am I a true Christian or am I a counterfeit?” Some don’t like to ask that question. They are so committed to eternal security that they think to raise any doubts in a person’s mind about his salvation is itself heretical. But I don’t think so. As a matter of fact, the Scriptures often raise such doubts in respect to those who outwardly associate with the church.

Well, what is the test that Paul speaks of which determines whether Jesus Christ lives within us? I think it might be instructive to first talk about what it isn’t! The test is not profession of faith. There are many who have claimed to believe, many who have walked an aisle and prayed a prayer but who have demonstrated no evidence of being truly born again. Jesus said of some who professed their faith vehemently, “I never knew you.”

The test is not intellectual belief. In James 2 the apostle scoffs at the claims of some that they are home free just because they believe in one God. He retorts, “Even the demons believe that—and shudder,” which is more than a lot of people do. He also makes it clear in the same chapter that faith without works, without a life change, is dead—not sick, not inadequate, but dead!

The test is not religious rite or ritual. There are many who substitute baptism or the Eucharist or church attendance or generosity for a genuine relationship with Christ. In Galatians 6 Paul addresses a ritual that was held in great esteem among some of the early Christians, circumcision, and he states categorically, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.”

The test is perhaps best expressed as being born again by faith in Christ, resulting in a changed life, and persevering in the truth. If a person has not been born again, Christ is not in them. It’s just that simple, according to John 3:3. If their experience of conversion does not result in a fundamental change at the very depths of their being, Christ is not in them and they are not in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). And if they do not persevere in the truth, Christ is not in them. 2 John 9 says, “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.”

This may trouble those who put huge stock in the doctrine of eternal security, but if so, they need to adjust their understanding of security. The Bible never promises security to anyone who has not had a genuine life-changing experience of God’s grace through Jesus Christ and who does not persevere in the faith.

As far as the Corinthian believers are concerned the time has come for a frank reappraisal of their walk with Christ. Let them not be presumptuous; let them be humble and introspective. For his part, Paul has already taken the self-test. He says in verse 6, “And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.”

Spiritual authority is committed to prayer and truth. (7-9)

If there are two words which best highlight the spiritual responsibilities of those in authority it

may be these two: prayer and truth. Paul mentions his prayer for the people in both verse 7 and verse 9. The fact that Paul is earnestly praying for the church should surprise no one who is familiar with his writings. In virtually everyone of his epistles he states clearly that he is praying for his flock.

In Ephesians 1:18, 19 he prays *“that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”*

In Philippians 1:9, 10 he prays *“that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”*

In Colossians 1:9-11 he prays *“for God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience.”*

I don't know if you are struck as I am by these prayers, but they stand out to me in that there is nothing about their aches and pains, their financial struggles, their unemployment, or their physical needs of any kind. The focus of Paul's prayer life for his churches was always on their spiritual health and spiritual growth.

Likewise here in 2 Corinthians. What he prays for them is that they will not do wrong but right (in regard to this matter of repentance). Verse 7 is difficult to interpret, but I think what Paul is saying is that in a sense his own reputation might actually be enhanced if they fail while he remains faithful, but he would much rather they do good than that he himself look good. He would much prefer seeing them repent than being able to come and flex his apostolic muscles. In fact, I think one commentator may be on to something when he paraphrases verse 9 this way: “I would be quite willing to let you go on thinking that I am very weak as an apostle, that I really do not amount to much, that I am only a paper tiger, as long as your behavior changes in line with who you really are.”

Then he speaks again of prayer: “Our prayer is for your perfection.” The term perfection speaks of wholeness and maturity rather than absolute moral perfection. It is used elsewhere to describe “a correct alignment of limbs and joints in the body, a resetting of what has been broken and dislocated, and hence a restoration of harmonious and efficient functioning.” Paul has already prayed for their obedience; now he prays for their wholeness.

In verse 8 Paul takes up the second key responsibility of those in spiritual authority—a commitment to truth: “We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” The reference to “truth” here is not just a synonym for honesty but also a commitment to God's will as revealed in His Holy Word. If you desire true spiritual authority, your word must be reliable and your teaching must resonate with Scripture. Otherwise your claims will ring hollow.

Now fourthly and finally we come to the heart of the issue of spiritual authority:

Spiritual authority thrives on edification, not demolition. (10)

“That is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.” There is a great principle in this passage that I have learned slowly over the years, but I want it to characterize whatever years of ministry I have remaining: the Lord gives authority for edification, not demolition. Some of you remember the early years of my ministry here, because I was just 28 when I first taught here and 31 when I became the pastor. At times I rebuked when I should have encouraged, spoke when I should have listened, and acted when I should have prayed. My only defense that I was young, immature, and in way over my head. I’m no longer young but I sometimes feel I am still in over my head.

I have learned that spiritual authority is like a hammer. It can be used either to tear something apart or to build something strong. Paul does not want to use the hammer as a weapon; he doesn’t want to be harsh with his congregation. You see, Christian leadership is different from leadership in the world. Jesus made that clear in Matthew 20:25-28. When James and John, the sons of Zebedee asked for the privilege of sitting on Jesus’ right hand and left in the kingdom, he declined but then used the inane request as a teachable moment for the rest of the disciples:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So while there is a place in church for occasional displays of decisive and courageous leadership and authority, the Lord has given as the primary purpose of that authority the edification of the flock.

Of course, when Paul speaks of the importance of using authority for building people up, he’s not talking about making them feel good all the time; he’s not talking about tolerance of sinful behavior; he’s talking about constantly seeking to it that the flock is being fed and trained and encouraged and brought to maturity.

As in most of Paul’s epistles, there are postscripts to 2 Corinthians. These are not always insignificant add-ons; rather they are more often than not important issues being highlighted by their placement at the end. If you’re like me, you always read postscripts to letters with special attention. Paul offers three in the form of perfection, affection, and benediction.

Postscripts:

Perfection (11). “Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” Perfection or complete maturity is unattainable, *but* that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t strive for it. The

Corinthian church was certainly not known for its maturity. If there was ever a church that thrived on adolescence, this was it, but the time has come to leave the elementary teachings and go on to maturity.

What does spiritual perfection or maturity look like? Well, the following phrases at least give us a few hints: listen to Paul's appeals, find unity, live in peace. None of these has heretofore characterized the Corinthian church, but there's no reason why they can't start. They aren't expected to do it on their own, of course. The God of love and peace is there to help them.

Affection (12). "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings." Both of Paul's comments in this verse stress the unity of the Body of Christ. Do you realize how often the Scriptures ask us to greet one another with a holy kiss? At least five times. In the early church it was not a mere formality, like a handshake in Western culture today. The holy kiss took on a special significance as a physical expression of brotherly love and mutual affection between church members of mixed social background, nationality, race, and gender. That it was to be a holy kiss eliminates any suggestion of sexual impurity. Paul encourages the early Christians to practice this because if they begin to display their affection for one another openly, it will help break down the barriers between them and help restore unity in the Body of Christ.

Benediction (14). "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." This benediction is theologically rich, mentioning all three persons of the Trinity. The grace of Jesus Christ is that which prompted Him to surrender the riches of His glory and give His life as a ransom for many. The love of God is a love so great that it was extended to sinners and to those who are His enemies. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is that which draws the hearts of all of God's children toward one another and makes true unity possible.

Conclusion: One intriguing question remains. How did the Corinthian church respond to Paul's passionate appeals to repent? We can't be sure, but we do know that Paul did indeed make that third visit to Corinth. He stayed three months and during that time wrote his *magnum opus*, the Epistle to the Romans. At that time he was also seriously considering a missionary trip to Spain (Rom. 15:28, 29), which seems unlikely if he had still been needed in Corinth. There is at least a strong possibility that the church took Paul's message to heart. How about us?

I want to close with a quotation from Dr. David Wells, former professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. It pertains somewhat to today's text but perhaps even more serves as a summary for our entire study of 2 Corinthians:

It is one thing to understand what Christ's deliverance means; it is quite another to see this worked out in life with depth and reality, to see its moral splendor. That is what makes the Gospel so attractive. The evangelical Church today, with some exceptions, is not very inspiring in this regard. Much of it, instead, is replete with tricks, gadgets, gimmicks, and marketing ploys as it shamelessly adapts itself to our emptied-out, blinded, postmodern world. It is supporting a massive commercial enterprise of Christian products, it is filling the airways and stuffing postal boxes, and it is always

begging for money to fuel one entrepreneurial scheme after another, but it is not morally resplendent. It is mostly empty of real moral vision, and without a recovery of that vision its faith will soon disintegrate. There is too little about it that bespeaks the holiness of God. And without the vision for and reality of this holiness, the Gospel becomes trivialized, life loses its depth, God becomes transformed into a product to be sold, faith into a recreational activity to be done, and the Church into a club for the like-minded.

Please Father, spare us from such a destiny!

i. Ray Stedman, *Power Out of Weakness: Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians*, 229.