**Paul, a Father-like Shepherd**

March 29, 2015

2 Corinthians 12:11-13:14

Key Verse 12:15a “So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.”

You can almost feel Paul’s frustration as he comes to the end of this letter. He has done all he could to bring the Corinthians to maturity in Christ. He has begged them, persuaded them, even threatened them and none of it seems to have made any difference. In fact in the end he has had to resort to utter foolishness to make his point. You can tell how much he hates having to boast. That is just not his style. But he’ll do whatever is necessary to get them back on track.

But now he has come to the end of his rope. He has had enough. So he finishes his letter with a rebuke. He may be a fool for boasting about his achievements, but they are even more foolish for accepting the things that his opponents were saying rather than realizing just how much he has done for them. Rather than him having to defend himself to them, they should have been commending him. So he finishes by pointing out to them once again, how his behavior has been above reproach.

**First**, Paul’s endurance. From the very outset of 1 Corinthians, it is apparent that the Corinthians looked up to certain leaders in the church, while looking down upon Paul. Paul’s message (“Christ crucified”—1 Cor 1:23) and his methods (1 Cor 2:1) did not appeal to the worldly wise. The “super-apostles,” who seek to establish their own authority as apostles, did so by challenging the authority of Paul. Virtually forced to do so, Paul reluctantly compares himself with these false apostles by “boasting” over certain aspects of his identity and his ministry. He boasts in the privilege God has given him to be an apostle to the Corinthians (10:8, 13, 16). He boasts that he has not been a burden to the Corinthians (11:7-12), that he is as Jewish as his opponents (11:16-22), and he boasts in his sufferings as Christ’s servant (11:23-29). He boasts in his visions and revelations (12:1-6) and finally, in his weaknesses (11:30-33; 12:7-10). In verse 12:11, Paul once again begins by referring to his boasting, reminding them that they forced him to boast by challenging the legitimacy of his apostleship and ministry.

His opponents complained that Paul’s presentation didn’t show enough power or supernatural miracles, but he says, if you think back to when I was with you, I did perform those signs and wonders and mighty works that you would expect of an apostle. But it was not a flashy performance like these people are expecting. No the context in which he worked was one of the utmost perseverance. Paul has spent the last couple of chapters talking about the various trials and tribulations he has put up with in order to preach the gospel to them. Look at 11:23-28. “Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”

So Paul is answering his own question: “How am I inferior to these ’super-apostles?” by saying, “in fact I am superior to them, not because I did more spectacular miracles, but because I kept going in the face of great obstacles and opposition. Even when I was discouraged and under great stress and anxiety, I kept preaching the gospel. I kept bringing people to Christ. I kept on teaching you and encouraging you.” Far from his trials and tribulations being a problem for his claim to be an apostle, his perseverance in the face of those trials is a sure fire proof of the genuineness of his claim. How do you know that you are a man of faith? The question is, are you able to persevere in your life of faith? Are you able to keep going despite your weakness? And the strength of your life of faith may well be shown by that ability to persevere, not by the spectacular results that arise from it. So Paul’s first reminder to them is that he showed his credentials as an apostle in the way he persevered.

**Second**, Paul’s integrity. He can’t stop himself from lapsing into sarcasm again. Verse 13 says, “How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you?” What a terrible apostle he must be, not to have made them support him! He obviously didn’t have much experience in the way of the world! Not to mention confidence in his own ministry. And then in verse 16 he says “Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!” It is so stupid to think that his failure to ask for support was a lack rather than a blessing. But his opponents obviously had a view of strong leadership that expected that sort of leadership to exploit them. That is not Christian leadership at all. In fact he set out not to ask them for support to make sure that they would have no reason to complain that he was preaching the gospel out of wrong motives.

But there was another reason for this decision: He saw himself as their spiritual father. Look at verses 14b-15a. “After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.” Now everyone knows that parenting is done free of charge. At least it should be. Imagine if your children have to pay their rent while living at home. Imagine if I charge my daughter for tutoring her. That is not how it works. We provide for our children, not the other way around. And so it was for Paul. He decided that as their spiritual father he would provide for them, not them for him. He is not saying that pastors shouldn’t be supported while they minister for the church. He said clearly in 1 Corinthians 9 that those who minister to the church should be supported by that church. But having said that, he decided that he wouldn’t burden them with that need. He would work part time to support himself so the gospel came to them as a free gift. Perhaps he knew that there would be this attitude that a strong leader would naturally demand support. And he wanted to show that that is not how the gospel works. He wanted to present the gospel as a free gift so that, in response, they would freely give him their love, not just their money. He is concerned that they recognize his integrity throughout their relationship. Look at verses 17-19: “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 follows the same course? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We are speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.” There is only one motive in Paul’s mind and actions. That is the spiritual growth of the Christians at Corinth. Other leaders may have mixed motives, but Paul’s are clear and uncompromised.

**Third**, Paul’s authority. Finally Paul reminds them that not only does he have the qualifications of a true apostle, but he also acts with the authority of an apostle. The reason he has written this last letter in fact, is out of his love for them, because he doesn’t want to come and find them continuing in their sinful lifestyles. Why? Because then he’ll have to deal harshly with them.
You may remember that back in chapter 2 he explains that the reason he had delayed his visit was to avoid giving them any more pain. Why? Because then he would have to do the disciplining of the offenders that the church had failed to do.

What is more, such a visit would also cause him pain. He says in verse 21: “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.” In other words, he knows that the things that have been going on would bring him to tears; would embarrass him once again. Here again, he is like a father who sees his children acting in a sinful way and weeps over their rebellion.

But he is not a weak father who turns a blind eye or who just shrugs his shoulders in resignation. Rather he is a loving father who warns his children, and will discipline them for their own good. He says in verses 13:1-2: “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.” The 2 or 3 witnesses is a reference to the Old Testament law, but in this context it means the 2 or 3 times that Paul himself has warned them about their behavior. So the third visit will be their final chance to repent. If not they will discover not his own power, but the power of Christ who works through him.

**Fourth**, Examine yourselves. Look at verse 13:5. “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?” Here is the ultimate test of the Christian’s behavior. Is your behavior consistent with the one who lives within you? Is the way you behave on Monday consistent with Christ’s life within you? Does the way you behave with your family fit with Christ dwelling within you? Does the way you behave at work fit with Christ dwelling within you? Does what you do on Friday night, or Saturday night, fit with Christ dwelling within you? Better that we judge that for ourselves and do something about it if we need to, than to have Christ judge us or even to have someone else point out our inconsistencies.

Jesus said in Matthew 7:22-23, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” Jesus is saying that on Judgment Day there will be people claiming to be Christians who will hear him say, “I never knew you.” In the Bible, when the words “know” or “knew” are used regarding a relationship, it means “to be very close, to be intimate.” So when Jesus says, “I never knew you,” he is saying, “You never came to me. We were never close.” Now, what must we do to make certain that we are “in the faith,” that we never hear the words, “Away from me, for I never knew you”? First of all, we must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you believe in him? You do? Then you are in the faith, right? No, not yet. In fact, in talking about faith, James 2:19 says, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.” They are certainly not in the faith – they are lost, and they know it. So there is more to faith than simply believing in Jesus. And that is the point that Paul is making when he writes about Jesus living in us and his Spirit affecting the way we think and speak and act.

The greatest evidence of Christianity is a transformed life. The greatest sermon ever preached is an object lesson in Christian faith – the one which is lived out in the concreteness of our actions – not that which is talked about with our words. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that “one act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons.” It has been well stated that action speak louder than words. If there are no changes at all, then the person ought to question whether they have really accepted Jesus. Paul wants the Corinthians to recognize that since he arrived and shared the gospel with them that they have indeed changed. If there are still quarreling, jealousy, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder, then they are not in the faith. We should ask ourselves, “Are we bearing the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and self-control?” (Gal 5:22) Now I suggest that if your life is not changed, if you can’t point to some definite changes that God is making in your life, then you are failing the test—because faith always brings about definite and sometimes dramatic changes in our lives.

Look at verse 13:11. “Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.” Many Christians say, “I am not perfect; I never will be perfect. And God knows I will never be perfect. Therefore, I see no need to ‘aim for perfection’ whatsoever. Simply being ‘good’ most of the time is surely sufficient for God’s approval.” That is not what the Bible says. It is clear that God wants every Christian to continually grow toward perfection, toward completeness. Just as failure to grow for a child is a sign of serious physical problems, so failure to continually grow in our faith is a sign of a serious spiritual condition. It is God’s will that we always strive to move forward along the road to eternal life, the road to perfection.

And finally, Paul leaves us with the encouragement of the gospel. After all is said and done, our life as a Christian depends on just three things: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Let’s finish today by repeating that prayer of Paul for the church wherever it is. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.”