

## “Rejoice”

### The Tenth and Last in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

*Texts: 2 Corinthians 13:1-14; Deuteronomy 19:51-21*

---

**Y**es, Paul is willing to play the fool with the Corinthians to expose the foolishness of the false apostles in Corinth. But Paul is also willing to use his apostolic authority to rebuke the Corinthians for tolerating false apostles and their false gospel in their midst. Having done all that he could do by letter, Paul informs the Corinthians that he will be making yet another (a third) journey to Corinth, and this time, he will deal with the false apostles once and for all. In other words, Paul is not planning a vacation to the beautiful city of Corinth. Paul is coming to Corinth to put an end to the turmoil the false apostles have created in the church, which Paul himself was so instrumental in founding.

With this sermon, we wrap up our series on 2 Corinthians as we turn to Paul’s stern rebuke of the Corinthians found in the last half of chapter twelve, and in the thirteenth and concluding chapter of this epistle. Before we turn to 2 Corinthians 12:11 and following, we need to set the context so as to understand the issues being addressed by Paul in our passage. In the final chapters of 2 Corinthians, it is apparent that Paul has gotten word that a group of false apostles had arrived in Corinth soon after Paul had left the city. Although Paul had been directed by Christ himself to preach the gospel elsewhere, the false teachers used Paul’s absence as evidence that Paul was not truly interested in the Corinthians. In his response to the efforts of the false apostles to undermine his Christ-given authority and office, Paul identifies these men as agents of Satan, because they preach a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel.

Although Paul shows his own mastery of Greek rhetoric through the skillful use of irony (playing the fool throughout this section of 2 Corinthians so as to expose the foolishness of the false apostles), Paul refuses to make himself the issue. Paul had endured all kinds of persecution, affliction and suffering. The false apostles who are attacking Paul for being weak could never endure what the “weak” Paul has endured. Paul could boast about this, but he doesn’t. Furthermore, Paul had been taken to the third heaven (or given a vision of it). He had even seen the risen Christ. None of the false teachers could boast of these things—yet Paul can boast. But he does not.

Paul responds to the charges that he was weak and indifferent by recounting all the horrific things that he endured precisely because Jesus had called Paul to his office as apostle to the Gentiles. Although Paul had much to boast about *if* he chose to boast, instead, Paul takes a different tact. He chooses to boast about his weakness, reminding the Corinthians that it is because of his weakness that his only confidence is in the power of Jesus Christ which is manifest in that gospel which Jesus had assigned Paul to preach. Paul may be weak. Paul may not be an eloquent speaker. But is it the self-proclaimed “strong” (i.e., the false apostles) who were exploiting the Corinthians with the very same pagan foolishness (which they call wisdom) from which Jesus Christ had delivered them. For good reason, Paul is exasperated with the Corinthians because they cannot see the damage that is being done to them by these men.

Even though God has allowed Paul to be afflicted by a mysterious “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble, Paul understands that it is because he is weak that Jesus Christ is his strength. Paul is not capable of fulfilling his apostolic office in his own strength. The false teachers may speak ill of him to the Corinthians, they even mock him personally, but this does not matter to Paul. This is not about Paul, or what he has seen and experienced. What matters to Paul is that the Corinthians hold fast to the gospel he has preached to them previously—and this means not being deceived by the false apostles and their false

gospel hidden in flowery words and lofty rhetoric.

As we turn to the last half of 2 Corinthians 12 (beginning in verse 11), Paul continues to rebuke the Corinthians for allowing themselves to be taken in by the false apostles. Paul may not be the skilled rhetorician that the false teachers were, but he is no slouch when it comes to the use of rhetoric. As he states in verse 11, *“I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you.”* Paul is done playing the fool. He has shown that *if* boasting is an expression of wisdom—the approach being taken by the false apostles in Corinth—Paul has got more to boast about than any of these false apostles. If he were to do what the false teachers were doing, he would excel them all. If the flowery speech and braggadocio of the false teachers is what the Corinthians want, they should have seen that Paul has a more impressive resume than all of them. Despite being weak, he has endured more than any one. Despite being unimpressive in person, Paul has seen the risen Christ and has even been taken to the third heaven. It is Paul who ought to be receiving commendations from the Corinthians, not the false apostles and their false gospel.

Yet, Paul will not depart from the true wisdom revealed to him by Jesus Christ in the gospel. As he states, *“for I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.”* Once again, Paul uses the derogatory term “super-apostles” in reference to the false apostles preaching a false gospel. The great irony is that because these false apostles think much more highly of themselves than they ought, all the while they are speaking ill of Paul, they consider themselves to be very successful and Paul to be nothing. Paul lets the self-evident irony stand for all to see. These men are not apostles and have no right to claim that office for themselves.

There is one more line of evidence confirming Paul’s call to the office of apostle, further refuting the claims of the super-apostles. In verse 12, he writes, *“the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.”* Paul makes a very important distinction between what we call the extra-ordinary gifts of the Spirit—those gifts associated with the office of apostle—and the normative work of the Spirit in which at least one spiritual gift is given to each Christian for the common good of all those who are members of the body of Christ. The mission of an apostle was to preach the gospel given to them by none other than Jesus himself, and to plant churches wherever they were sent by the Holy Spirit. But the work of the apostles (preaching the gospel) was confirmed and accompanied by signs, wonders, and mighty works.

The extra-ordinary working of the Spirit was not made manifest to impress people—like a magician who performs a trick which attracts and wows an audience. These extra-ordinary activities of the Spirit confirm the truth of the gospel. In describing the signs of a true apostle, Paul exposes the false apostles as men without such accompanying demonstrations of the Spirit’s power. The only way Paul has patiently endured these trials caused by the false apostles is because the Holy Spirit has enabled him to do so. As he reminds the Corinthians in verse 13, *“For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!”*

The Holy Spirit worked through Paul just as he did in all the other churches established by Paul. The Corinthians did not miss out on anything because Paul was their founding apostle. Paul did not burden the Corinthians by asking for money beyond the offering being taken for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem. The Apostle facetiously asks his readers, “should the Corinthians forgive him for not treating them any differently than the other churches, when they were given so much by God?”

Beginning in verse 14 and continuing on through the end of chapter 12, Paul sternly warns the Corinthians that he will be returning to Corinth one more time, and it will not be a pleasant visit. Then,

in chapter 13, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to test their faith in Christ to see if it be genuine. In verse 14, Paul speaks again of his third visit to Corinth. His first trip to Corinth was when he established the church. This is recounted in Acts 18. The second visit is the so-called painful visit after he had sent his first letter to the church (this is recounted in 2 Corinthians 2:1). But Paul will come to Corinth one more time. *“Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you.”* Paul will not ask for money, as was the case with the offering for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem. He is coming not to ask for anything, but to meet with the Corinthians to address the presence of false apostles teaching a different Jesus, a different spirit, and preaching a different gospel. In other words, Paul is coming to Corinth on official business.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of a point made earlier in this epistle, that in many ways he is the spiritual father of this congregation. As he tells the Corinthians in the last half of verse 14, *“For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.”* This role comes with Paul’s calling as apostle to the Gentiles. Paul will come to Corinth and he will not be a burden. In doing so, Paul will once again show himself to be the true apostle to the Gentiles and not a pretender like the false apostles, whom, as it is implied, were a burden to the Corinthians. In fact, as Paul puts it in verse 15, *“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”* It is remarkable that Paul has to defend himself after all he has done for the Corinthians. Sadly, this shows how fickle sinful people are, and the lengths to which they will go to have their itching ears tickled.

Paul now responds directly to the accusations being made against him in his absence. In verse 16, he states, *“but granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.”* Here, we have to read between the lines a bit, as yet another underlying issue between Paul and the Corinthians begins to become clear. Apparently, certain of the false apostles were contending that Paul somehow profited from the offering which had been taken for the struggling churches in Jerusalem. In verses 18-19, Paul addresses this accusation in more detail. *“Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?”*

What evidence do the false teachers have for implying that Paul somehow profited from the offering? None. Titus was above reproach as was Paul. There was no deceit, no bait and switch tactics, only an offering being taken for the poorest of the poor as a witness to the unity of the church (between Jew and Gentile) and to show the compassion of Christ. By implying Paul was raiding the till, the false apostles have sunk to a new low—as have those Corinthians who have believed this utterly false accusation.

Neither Paul nor Titus did anything wrong when collecting the offering, and Paul is under no obligation to defend himself against such ridiculous and false accusations. Yet, why does he go to all this trouble? Again, he refuses to let himself be the issue. As he explains to the Corinthians in verse 19, *“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.”* In order to attract followers, the false apostles have been preaching another Jesus, another spirit and another gospel. And to establish their supposed right to do so, the false apostles have claimed some sort of apostolic authority. To make that case, the false apostles have had to make Paul the issue. He’s not a skilled preacher, as they are. He’s weak and worn out, and doesn’t have charismatic personality and presence which they have. Paul is not even present in Corinth, they are. And what is worse, some were implying that Paul may have profited from the offering which he commanded be taken in churches. The false apostles have tried to make Paul the issue, because Paul stands in the way of their take-over of the church.

But Paul refuses to concede the point or take the bait. This is not about him. It is about Christ and his

gospel. Paul is not defending himself because he needs to preserve his honor, or his reputation—he’s been through enough already. The churches know who Paul is and what he preaches. Paul is worried about a congregation he loves, and whom he wishes to see thrive in Christ. Paul speaks as he does because he does not want the Corinthians to suffer at the hands of the false apostles. Paul has not been defending himself, so much as speaking the truth before God. Yet, because the Corinthians are so immature and still fascinated by pagan wisdom, Paul appeals to them first by playing the fool, and now by recounting how he only desires their upbuilding. Paul does not labor to impress people. Paul labors before God, because doing the right thing is in the best interests of the Corinthians, even if they can’t see it.

Paul knows that damage has already been done by the false apostles, and now he seeks to repair it. In verse 20, he writes, *“For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.”* All of these things are fruit of the flesh and come about because the false apostles have been sowing the seeds of these destructive fruit ever since Paul departed from Corinth. The close relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church may indeed be damaged. The Corinthians are not where Paul wants them to be. Paul may not be what the Corinthians want. But Paul is exactly who and what the Corinthians need. They don’t need the false apostles.

If the Corinthian church has become overgrown with the fruit of the flesh, and lacks the fruit of repentance, well then, Paul will deal with it in person, and not by letter. As Paul points out in verse 21, *“I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.”* False doctrine, or indifference to biblical doctrine always leads to unchecked sin and its consequences. Should Paul return to Corinth and find things as bad as he fears that they are, then Paul will be humbled by being forced to mourn over those who will be removed from the church, because they have not repented and have used “pagan” wisdom as justification for continuing in their sin. This is not trip to which Paul is looking forward. This is not a vacation for Paul, but a very difficult (and humbling) part of his duties as Apostle to the Gentiles.

As we move into chapter 13, the gravity of Paul’s concern for the Corinthians becomes apparent. As he states in verse 1, *“This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”* Paul had implied in the previous verse that excommunication might be necessary. Now he invokes the Old Testament requirement for two or three witnesses for testimonial evidence to be valid. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 19:15, a portion of our Old Testament lesson to make his point. If he is forced to make his third journey to Corinth, he will seek to remove the false apostles from the church. Since they cannot possibly produce witnesses against him, Paul must be referring to bringing evidence against the false apostles, something it appears, he is willing to do.

The Reformed have always insisted that church discipline is one of the three marks of a true church. We do this because of comments such as Paul’s warning in verse 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.”* Church discipline has nothing to do with embarrassing people for being sinners, nor with exposing private sin. It has everything to do with correcting those who stubbornly refuse to repent of their sins, as well as defending the gospel from people who insist upon spreading false doctrine. In this case, it seems, both are in view. When Paul warns those who have sinned before, he’s not singling out people who are struggling with habitual sins. He is speaking of people who are unrepentant when they sin, who seek to justify their sin, and who refuse to stop. Paul has already mentioned that at least one of the false apostles had been disciplined, and Paul did not want the person overwhelmed with excessive sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:7).

But this is different. This has to do with men claiming to be apostles, denying the Jesus and the spirit Paul had taught in the church, and who were preaching a false gospel. Furthermore, they were slandering Paul and Titus with all kinds of specious allegations. Things have obviously reached the point where Paul must go to Corinth and remove these people from the church, just as one removes a cancerous tumor from the body. The people of whom Paul is referring will not be spared—unless they repent. While Paul may have been weak and willing to suffering, the Lord of the church (Jesus) is not weak. He will act.

As Paul warns in verses 3-4, *“You seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 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.”* Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have witnessed the power of Christ through the proclamation of the gospel. The same Jesus who gave himself up on the cross for us all, was also raised from the dead—the greatest demonstration of power in human history. The Corinthians may be weak. Paul may be weak. The false apostles are weak, but will not admit it.

But Jesus Christ is not weak, and that one who gives life from the dead is not to be taken lightly when it comes to the protection and safety of his church. And so Paul rebukes the Corinthians for tolerating these men in the church and for allowing things to get so far out of hand. In verse 5, he commands them, *“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!”* The test is for the Corinthians to ask themselves whether they believe the gospel Paul preached to them. Do they trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. Do they trust that Jesus will deliver them from the wrath of God on the day of judgment? Does Christ’s Spirit indwell them—proven by the fact that one trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation? If the Corinthians believe this gospel, then they pass the test. And having passed the test, it is obvious what must be done about those teaching another Jesus, another spirit, and proclaiming another gospel. They must be shown the door!

Paul knows and loves these people. He is hopeful. *“I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.”* Paul wants the Corinthians to rely solely upon the merits of Jesus Christ—his doing and dying, for us, and in our place—not to be taken in by the super-apostles and their false gospel and pagan foolishness. If they do indeed trust in Christ, then they will see that the gospel Paul has been preaching is true, and that he has done nothing but point them to the merits of Christ. And for that he is belittled?

One more time, Paul pushes the Corinthians to get their eyes off the false teachers, and off himself. Paul wants the Corinthians to focus upon the gospel. As he puts it in verses 7-8, *“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. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”* Since the Christian gospel is based upon a truth claim—either Jesus did die for our sins and was raised for our justification, and therefore Christianity is still true whether anyone believes it or not, or else Jesus didn’t die for our sins, and was not raised from the dead, so that Christianity cannot be true no matter how many people believe it. Paul’s point is that the truth will prevail because it is truth.

Because Paul’s confidence is in the power of God, he can declare, *“for we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.”* Paul only wants to best for the Corinthians. As he tells them in verse 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.”* Paul does not want conflict. He hopes for better things. Paul wants the Corinthians to repent and to remove the false apostles from their midst.

Therefore, in verse 11, Paul extends the following exhortation to the Corinthians in light of his impending visit. *“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”* Despite all that has transpired, Paul still calls the Corinthians “brothers.” And given all that God had done for the Corinthians, Paul exhorts them to “rejoice,” and be thankful to God for the grace he has shown them in Jesus Christ. The Corinthians should now make it their goal to restore broken relationships, to comfort those who are suffering, to come to mutual agreement about the true gospel, the true Jesus and the true Spirit, because it is the truth of the gospel which establishes lasting peace in the churches.

And so Paul closes out this letter with the apostolic and Trinitarian benediction—words used to conclude Christian worship from the very beginning. Says Paul in verse 12-14, *“Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”* Since a kiss on the cheek or face was normally extended only to family members or the closest of friends, Paul is making the point that all Christians are family. He is also clear that the grace, love and fellowship of God, come to us through the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Make no mistake about it—Paul believes that the one true God is revealed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul is a Trinitarian.

**W**hat do we take with us by way of application?

In the closing words of 2 Corinthians we discover what really matters to Paul, which means that these are things that should matter to us. The first thing we find is that Paul refuses to let the false apostles go unchallenged. It is not a matter of personalities—Paul against those seeking to usurp him. It is not about hurt feelings or Paul’s reputation. It is a matter of the false apostles seeking to usurp Paul’s authority so as to preach another Jesus, another spirit, and a false gospel. If a church does not have a gospel to preach, or fails to preach the gospel it has, it ceases to be a true church. This is what we are getting at when we speak of church discipline as a mark of a true church. If a church allows false apostles to preach a false gospel, a false Jesus, and a false spirit, it ceases to be a true church. This matters to Paul and it must matter to us.

The second thing we find is Paul’s stress upon Christians living in peace with one another despite the difficulties in the church. The solution is that Christians must realize that Jesus died for the weak, and for those who are unable to save ourselves from the guilt and power of sin. We are weak. We are unable to save ourselves. We are not strong. We are not wise. That is why we must look to Christ, who alone is strong and reveals true wisdom in the gospel. In light of our own weakness, who are we to look down on anyone else, and think ourselves better, or more pious than others. This is why we are to comfort each other, to strive for peace, and to rejoice in our weakness and difficult circumstances. For when we realize how weak we really are, we will finally look to Christ, who is our strength. This is why we rejoice in the midst of our trials and afflictions. Jesus is all we have. Jesus is all we need.

Beloved, Rejoice! Jesus Christ is our strength.