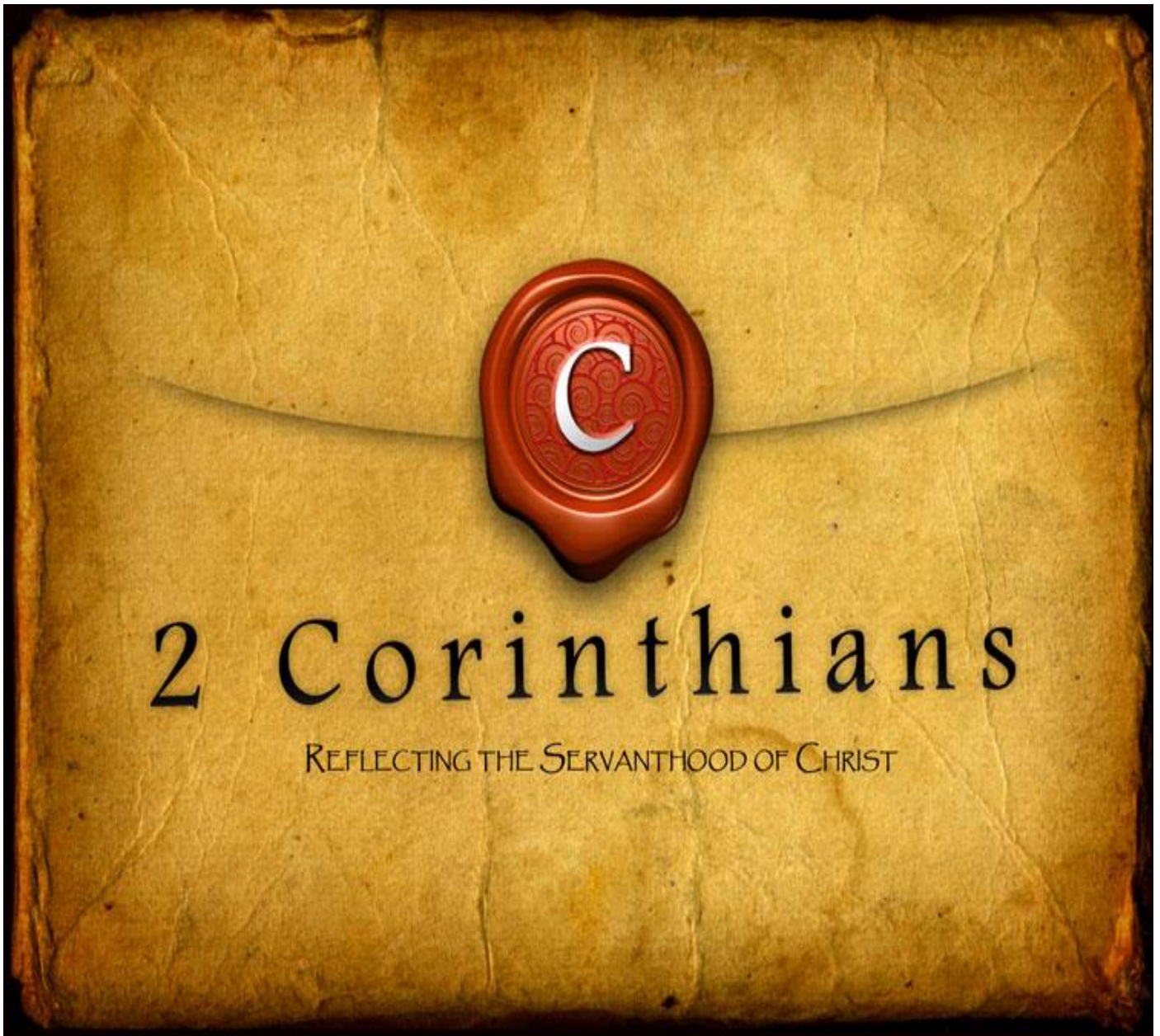


*LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE CROSS
2012 WINTER BIBLE STUDY*



JANUARY 3 – APRIL 1

TUES. 6AM WED. 10AM & 6:15PM, SUN. 9AM AT LW

SUNDAY 10:45 AM AT AV

FINDING STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

2 CORINTHIANS LIFEGUIDE® BIBLE STUDY Finding Strength in Weakness

12 Studies for individuals or groups by Paul Stevens

Getting the Most from LifeGuide® Bible Studies

Many of us long to fill our minds and our lives with Scripture. We desire to be transformed by its message. LifeGuide® Bible Studies are designed to be an exciting and challenging way to do just that. They help us to be guided by God's Word in every area of life.

How They Work

LifeGuides® have a number of distinctive features. Perhaps the most important is that they are *inductive* rather than *deductive*. In other words, they lead us to *discover* what the Bible says rather than simply *telling* us what it says. They are also thought provoking. They help us to think about the meaning of the passage so that we can truly understand what the author is saying. The questions require more than one-word answers.

The studies are personal. Questions expose us to the promises, assurances, exhortations and challenges of God's Word. They are designed to allow the Scriptures to renew our minds so that we can be transformed by the Spirit of God. This is the ultimate goal of all Bible study. The studies are versatile. They are designed for student, neighborhood and church groups. They are also effective for individual study.

How They're Put Together

LifeGuides® also have a distinctive format. Each study need take no more than forty-five minutes in a group setting or thirty minutes in personal study—unless you choose to take more time.

The studies can be used within a quarter system in a church and fit well in a semester or trimester system on a college campus. If a guide has more than thirteen studies, it is divided into two or occasionally three parts of approximately twelve studies each. LifeGuides® use a workbook format. Space is provided for writing answers to each question. This is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for the discussion.

The studies also contain leader's notes. They show how to lead a group discussion, provide additional background information on certain questions, give helpful tips on group dynamics and suggest ways to deal with problems which may arise during the discussion. With such helps, someone with little or no experience can lead an effective study.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will help you to understand and apply the passage to your life.
2. Read and reread the assigned Bible passage to familiarize yourself with what the author is saying. In the case of book studies, you may want to read through the entire book prior to the first study. This will give you a helpful overview of its contents.
3. A good modern translation of the Bible, rather than the King James Version or a paraphrase, will give you the most help. The New International Version, the New American Standard Bible and the Revised Standard Version are all recommended. However, the questions in this guide are based on the New International Version.
4. Write your answers in the space provided in the study guide. This will help you to express your understanding of the passage clearly.
5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

Suggestions for Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned from the passage. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide. Plan to share what God has taught you in your individual study.

3. Stick to the passage being studied. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. This guide deliberately avoids jumping from book to book or passage to passage. Each study focuses on only one passage. Book studies are generally designed to lead you through the book in the order in which it was written. This will help you follow the author's argument.

4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they share what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Link what you say to the comments of others so the group stays on the topic. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to share what we have learned that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together.

7. If you are the discussion leader, you will find additional suggestions and helpful ideas for each study in the leader's notes. These are found at the back of the guide.

Introducing 2 Corinthians

Life is relational. We hope and hurt the most about relationships with people who matter to us. A special friend we are in danger of losing, an employer who misunderstands our actions, a spouse who seems distant and cold, a brother in Christ who has spoken behind our back, a family member long estranged, are samples of the web of relationships that make up our lives. When a special relationship is hanging by a slender thread, we are often at a loss to know what to say or do. Should we tell the truth even if it hurts? Should we avoid confrontation? Should we share what is going on inside us even if it shows we are weak and struggling, far weaker than we would like others to know?

Second Corinthians is all about relationships—not perfect ones, but real ones. In this letter the apostle Paul reveals that he is struggling deeply in his relationship with the believers in Corinth. Though he founded this church, they have apparently rejected him. This letter is an attempt at reconciliation. What made Paul's relationship more complicated was the seeming contest between Paul and his converts. The Corinthians were enjoying charismatic ecstasy. They had their orators, theologians, super-saints and super-apostles. They were strong, wise and triumphant. Paul, in contrast, was weak, foolish and a seeming failure.

In similar circumstances most people try to use strength and wisdom to win their way back. They create just the right leadership image. But Paul chose to pour out his soul to them, trusting that in the process Christ would be revealed. In this letter Paul is both medium and message. This great Christian leader takes the enormous risk of telling how confused, upset and weak he is. In 1 Corinthians Paul lets us see inside a first century church. But in 2 Corinthians Paul lets us see inside a first century Christian, the apostle himself. Through his large heart we see into the heart of God and the heart of the Christian message.

Paul founded the church in Corinth about A.D. 50. It was a lively church composed of first generation Christians but infected with many of the problems associated with a mission. Corinth was the Las Vegas of the Roman Empire. Some new believers polluted the church with their secular standards in business and sexuality.

They argued that all things are permissible in Christ. Others got superspiritual and boasted about their visions, prophecies, words of knowledge and spiritual experiences. In the course of time they wrote Paul asking for advice. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in about A.D. 55 to address these questions and various problems. Then it seems the Corinthians turned against the founding apostle, a crucial fact to know in order to understand 2 Corinthians This letter was born in hurt.

Paul paid a second “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1) and wrote a “sorrowful” letter, now lost, from Ephesus (2 Cor. 2:4). It is highly likely that Paul then came to Macedonia (2 Cor. 7:5), modern Greece, where he was reunited with Titus from Corinth and from which he wrote 2 Corinthians, probably while in Philippi.¹ Later in A.D. 56 Paul visited Corinth again to receive their gifts for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

As 2 Corinthians was written, Paul had several problems with the Corinthians: he changed his travel plans and did not come when he said he would (2 Cor. 1:12-2:4); they failed to discipline the person who caused a grievous offence (2 Cor. 2:5-11); their contributions for his collection for the Jewish Christians had lapsed (2 Cor. 8-9); he had accepted financial support from the Macedonians (Thessalonica and Philippi) but not from the Achaians, especially the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:7-11). Paul also conflicted with newly arrived ministers in Corinth who preached a different gospel, probably a return to a form of Judaism (2 Cor. 2:14-7:4; 2 Cor. 10:1-13:14). Some individual Corinthians criticized Paul because he was a powerful letter-writer but a weak speaker who was unimpressive in person.

This relational conflict becomes the medium for revealing the distinctive message of this book: Christ meets us at our point of desperate weakness, *not only before we are saved, but after*. Against the false triumphalism of his opponents, Paul proclaims a gospel in which God’s power is demonstrated best in human weakness. We have the Christ-treasure in earthen vessels or, as Phillips powerfully paraphrases, “in a common earthenware jar.” In a day when authentic Christianity seems less attractive than superspirituality or the “gospel of health, wealth and prosperity,” Paul’s searing honesty offers exactly what the world so deeply hungers for: it tells us how to be really real. As we walk through Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians step by step, we discover how God in Christ is prepared to meet our deepest relational needs just as we are and where we are.

¹This reconstruction follows that proposed by Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1984), pp. 54-55.

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Session #1 Jan. 3-8 Our Comforting God

2 Corinthians 1:1-11 New International Version

[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia: [2] Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [3] Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, [4] 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. [5] For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. [6] If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. [7] And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

[8] We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. [9] Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but

on God, who raises the dead. [10] He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, [11] as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.

Isaiah 50:4 [4] The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.

Life Application Notes

1:1 Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey and founded a church there (Acts 18:1ff). He later wrote several letters to the believers in Corinth, two of which are included in the Bible. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is lost (1 Cor. 5:9-11), his second letter to them is our book of 1 Corinthians, his third letter is lost (2 Cor. 2:6-9; 2 Cor. 7:12), and his fourth letter is our book of 2 Corinthians. Second Corinthians was written less than a year after 1 Corinthians.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with divisions in the church. When his advice was not taken and their problems weren't solved, Paul visited Corinth a second time. That visit was painful both for Paul and for the church (2 Cor. 2:1). He then planned a third visit, but delayed it and wrote 2 Corinthians instead. After writing 2 Corinthians, Paul visited Corinth once more (Acts 20:2-3).

1:1 Paul had great respect for Timothy (see also Phil. 2:19-20; 1 Tim. 1:2), one of his traveling companions (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy had accompanied Paul to Corinth on his second missionary journey, and Paul had recently sent him there to minister (1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Cor. 16:10). Timothy's report to Paul about the crisis in the Corinthian church prompted Paul to make an unplanned visit to the church to deal with the problem in person (see 2 Cor. 2:1). For more information on Timothy, see his Profile.

1:1 The Romans had made Corinth the capital of Achaia (the southern half of present-day Greece). The city was a flourishing trade center because of its seaport. With the thousands of merchants and sailors who disembarked there each year, it had developed a reputation as one of the most immoral cities in the ancient world; its many pagan temples encouraged the practice of sexual immorality along with idol worship. In fact, the Greek word "to Corinthianize" came to mean "to practice sexual immorality." A Christian church in the city would face many pressures and conflicts. For more information on Corinth, see the first note on +1 Cor. 1:2.

1:3-5 Many think that when God comforts us, our troubles should go away. But if that were always so, people would turn to God only out of a desire to be relieved of pain and not out of love for him. We must understand that being *comforted* can also mean receiving strength, encouragement, and hope to deal with our troubles. The more we suffer, the more comfort God gives us. If you are feeling overwhelmed, allow God to comfort you. Remember that every trial you endure will help you comfort other people who are suffering similar troubles.

1:5 The "sufferings of Christ" are those afflictions we experience as we do Christ's ministry. At the same time, Christ suffers with his people, since they are united with him. In Acts 9:4-5 Christ asked Paul why he was persecuting him. This implies that Christ suffered with the early Christians when they were persecuted.

1:6-7 Paul explains that he and his companions suffered greatly for bringing "comfort and salvation" to the Corinthians. But just as God comforted Paul, God would also comfort the Corinthian believers when they suffered for their faith. He would give them the strength to endure.

1:8-10 Paul does not give details about their hardships in Asia, although his accounts of all three missionary journeys record many difficult trials he faced (Acts 13:2-14:28; Acts 15:40-21:17). He does write that they felt that they were going to die, and realized that they could do nothing to help themselves—they simply had to rely on God.

1:8-10 We often depend on our own skills and abilities when life seems easy, but we turn to God when we feel unable to help ourselves. Depending on God is a realization of our own powerlessness without him and our need for his constant touch in our lives. God is our source of power, and we receive his help by keeping in

touch with him. With this attitude of dependence, problems will drive us to God rather than away from him. Learn how to rely on God daily.

1:11 Paul requested prayer for himself and his companions as they traveled to spread God's message. Pray for pastors, teachers, missionaries, and others who are spreading the gospel. Satan will challenge anyone making a real difference for God.

Session #1 Questions

Life is difficult!" With these three words Scott Peck begins his best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*. But in 2 Corinthians Paul says this and more. Just where life is difficult, where our relationships are strained, where our competence is questioned, where our health and security are threatened, God makes himself known in powerful comfort. We discover that one of the supreme greatnesses of Christianity is that it does not seek a supernatural escape from the difficulties of life. Instead it offers a supernatural use for them. Troubles become triumphs as God makes himself known in our weakness.

1. Recall a time in your life when friends comforted you while you were hard-pressed and despairing. What qualities in their relationship with you enabled them really to comfort you?

2. Read 2 Cor. 1:1-11. After his customary greeting and "signature," Paul breaks into praise. What evokes this spontaneous worship?

3. Why do you think Paul loves rather than hates God because of all he has suffered?

4. What is the connection between the sufferings of Christ and the comfort of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5-6)?

5. In what ways have you experienced God's comfort in a difficult situation?

6. Why do you think our experience of God's comfort enables us to comfort others who are suffering?

7. Paul's hardships in the province of Asia (modern-day Turkey) were evidently life-threatening. What did he discover about the meaning of such sufferings in the Christian life (2 Cor. 1:8-11)?

8. How do you think Paul's openness in sharing the realities of his Christian experience affected his relationship with the Corinthians?

How would it have further equipped them as partners in the gospel?

9. Based on what you have learned in these first eleven verses, how can hardships draw you closer to God instead of driving you away from him?

10. What must you do to allow your hardest experiences to be transformed into ministry assets?

The sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. (Isaiah 50:4)

Of the many solutions given in Scripture of the mystery of pain, this is not the least notable; the sufferer who feels that his sufferings equip him as a missionary of comfort to others will feel that they are well-explained.¹

¹Quoted in R. V. G. Tasker, *2 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 41.

Session #2 Jan. 10-15 Always Yes in Christ

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:17 New International Version

[12] Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace. [13] For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, [14] as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

[15] Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. [16] I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. [17] When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?

[18] But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." [19] For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." [20] For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. [21] Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, [22] set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

[23] I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. [24] Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

Chapter 2

[1] So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. [2] For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? [3] I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. [4] For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

[5] If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent--not to put it too severely. [6] The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. [7] Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. [8] I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. [9] The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. [10] If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, [11] in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

[12] Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, [13] I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia.

[14] But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. [15] For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. [16] To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? [17] Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

Life Application Notes

1:12-14 Paul knew the importance of holiness and sincerity in word and action, especially in a situation as in Corinth, where constructive criticism was necessary. So Paul did not come with impressive human knowledge (worldly wisdom). God wants us to be real and transparent in all our relationships. If we aren't, we may end up lowering ourselves to spreading rumors, gossiping, and second-guessing.

1:15-17 Paul had recently made a brief, unscheduled visit to Corinth that was very painful for him and the church (see 2 Cor. 2:1). After that visit, he told the church when he would return. But Paul changed his original travel plans. Instead of sailing from Ephesus to Corinth before going to Macedonia, he traveled from Ephesus directly to Macedonia, where he wrote a letter to the Corinthians that caused him much anguish and them much sorrow (2 Cor. 7:8-9). He had made his original plans thinking that the church would have solved its problems. When the time came for Paul's scheduled trip to Corinth, however, the crisis had not been fully resolved (although progress was being made in some areas; 2 Cor. 7:11-16). So he wrote a letter instead (2 Cor. 2:3-4; 2 Cor. 7:8) because another visit may have only made matters worse. Thus Paul stayed away from Corinth because he was concerned over the church's unity, not because he was fickle.

1:17-20 Paul's change of plans caused some of his accusers to say that he couldn't be trusted, hoping to undermine his authority. Paul said that he was not the type of person to say "yes" when he means "no." Paul explained that it was not indecision but concern for their feelings that forced him to change his plans. The reason for his trip-to bring joy (2 Cor. 1:24)-could not be accomplished with the present crisis. Paul didn't want to visit them only to rebuke them severely (2 Cor. 1:23). Just as the Corinthians could trust God to keep his promises, they could trust Paul as God's representative to keep his. He would still visit them, but at a better time.

1:19-20 All of God's promises of what the Messiah would be like are fulfilled in Christ ("in him it has always been 'Yes' "). Jesus was completely faithful in his ministry; he never sinned (1 Peter 3:18); he faithfully died for us (Hebrews 2:9); and now he faithfully intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 4:14-15). Because Jesus Christ is faithful, Paul wanted to be faithful in his ministry.

1:21-22 Paul mentions two gifts God gives when we become believers: (1) a *seal of ownership* to show who our Master is, and (2) the Holy Spirit, who guarantees that we belong to him and will receive all his benefits (Ephes. 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit guarantees that salvation is ours now, and that we will receive so much more when Christ returns. The great comfort and power the Holy Spirit gives in this life is a foretaste or down payment ("deposit") of the benefits of our eternal life in God's presence. With the privilege of belonging to God comes the responsibility of identifying ourselves as his faithful servants. Don't be ashamed to let others know that you are his.

1:23 The Corinthian church had written to Paul with questions about their faith (see 1 Cor. 7:1). In response, Paul had written 1 Corinthians. But the church did not follow his instructions.

Paul had planned to visit them again, but instead he wrote a letter that caused sorrow (2 Cor. 7:8-9) to give them another chance to change their ways. He didn't want to visit and repeat the same advice for the same problems. He wrote the emotional letter to encourage them to follow the advice that he had already given in previous letters and visits.

2:1 Paul's phrase, "another painful visit," indicates that he had already made one difficult trip to Corinth (see the notes on +2 Cor. 1:1; +2 Cor. 1:15-17) since founding the church. Paul had gone there to deal with those in the church who had been attacking and undermining his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, thus confusing other believers.

2:3 Paul's last letter, referred to here, was not the book of 1 Corinthians, but a letter written between 1 and 2 Corinthians, just after his unplanned, painful visit (2 Cor. 2:1). Paul refers to this letter again in 2 Cor. 7:8.

2:4 Paul did not enjoy reprimanding his friends and fellow believers, but he cared enough about the Corinthians to confront them with their wrongdoing. Proverbs 27:6 says: "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Sometimes our friends make choices that we know are wrong. If we ignore their behavior and let them continue in it, we won't be showing love to them. We show love by honestly sharing our concerns in order to help these friends do and be their very best for God. When we don't make any move to help, we show that we are more concerned about being well liked than about what will happen to them.

2:5-11 Paul explained that it was time to forgive the man who had been punished by the church and had subsequently repented. He needed forgiveness, acceptance, and comfort. Satan would gain an advantage if they permanently separated this man from the congregation rather than forgiving and restoring him. This may have been the man who had required the disciplinary action described in 1 Cor. 5, or he may have been the chief opponent of Paul who had caused Paul the anguish described in 2 Cor. 2:1-11. The sorrowful letter had finally brought about the repentance of the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:8-14), and their discipline of the man had led to his repentance. Church discipline should seek restoration. Two mistakes in church discipline should be avoided-being too lenient and not correcting mistakes, or being too harsh and not forgiving the sinner. There is a time to confront and a time to comfort.

2:11 We use church discipline to help keep the church pure and to help wayward people repent. But Satan tries to harm the church by tempting it to use discipline in an unforgiving way. This causes those exercising discipline to become proud of their purity, and it causes the person who is being disciplined to become bitter and perhaps leave the church entirely. We must remember that our purpose in discipline is to *restore* a person to the fellowship, not to destroy him or her. We must be cautious that personal anger is not vented under the guise of church discipline.

2:13 Titus was a Greek convert whom Paul greatly loved and trusted (the book of Titus is a letter that Paul wrote to him). Titus was one of the men responsible for collecting the money for the poverty-stricken

Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8:6). Paul may also have sent Titus with the sorrowful letter. On his way to Macedonia, Paul was supposed to meet Titus in Troas. When Paul didn't find him there, he was worried for Titus's safety and left Troas to search for him in Macedonia. There Paul found him (2 Cor. 7:6), and the good news that Paul received (2 Cor. 7:8-16) led to this letter. Paul would send Titus back to Corinth with this letter (2 Cor. 8:16-17).

2:14ff In the middle of discussing his unscheduled trip to Macedonia, Paul thanked God for his ministry, his relationship with the Corinthian believers, and the way God had used him to help others wherever he went, despite difficulties (2 Cor. 2:14-7:4). In 2 Cor. 7:5, Paul resumed his story of his trip to Macedonia.

2:14-16 In a Roman triumphal procession, the Roman general would display his treasures and captives amidst a cloud of incense burned for the gods. To the victors, the aroma was sweet; to the captives in the parade, it was the smell of slavery and death. When Christians preach the gospel, it is good news to some and repulsive news to others. Believers recognize the life-giving fragrance of the message. To nonbelievers, however, it smells foul, like death-their own.

2:16-17 Paul asks "who is equal" to the task of representing Christ? Our adequacy is always from God (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:5). He has already commissioned and sent us (see Matthew 28:18-20). He has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us to speak with Christ's power. He keeps his eye on us, protecting us as we work for him. So, if we realize that God makes us competent and useful, we can overcome our feelings of inadequacy. Serving Christ, therefore, requires that we focus on what he can do through us, not on what we can't do by ourselves.

2:17 Some preachers in Paul's day were "peddlers" of God's word, preaching without understanding God's message or caring about what happened to their listeners. They weren't concerned about furthering God's kingdom-they just wanted money. Today there are still religious teachers who care only about money, and not about truth. Those who truly speak for God should have sincerity and integrity, and should never preach for selfish reasons (1 Tim. 6:5-10).

Session #2 Questions

Contrary to what some misguided Christian parents think, affirming children does not make them proud and self-centered. Rather, it meets a fundamental need of the human personality to receive the unqualified affirmation of a significant other. But often our attempts to affirm each other backfire.

Such was Paul's experience with the Corinthians. They regarded his change in travel plans and his tough love as a mixed signal, a yes and no. Paul had already made two visits to Corinth, the first to found the church, and another "painful" visit to deal with a serious discipline problem. The latter visit, combined with a difficult letter, resulted in an almost complete breakdown in Paul's relationship with the Corinthians.

Paul had promised to visit them again, twice in fact, first as he made his way to Macedonia and then on his way back. But he changed his plans, delaying his visit and deciding to visit only once. This led his opponents to claim that he was unreliable or fickle. In the process of defending his actions, Paul points the Corinthians to the ultimate ground of our affirmation: the eternal "yes" spoken to us by God in Christ.

1. Recall an experience of being affirmed by another, possibly a parent or a good friend. What made that word or action especially upbuilding for you?

2. Read 2 Cor. 1:12-22. Based on these verses, what do you think Paul's opponents were saying about his motives and ministry style?

3. What reasons does Paul give for maintaining that his change of itinerary was not a change of mind about the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:12, 17)?

4. Why do you think Paul directs their attention away from his travel plans to the unqualified yes or "amen" of the gospel (2 Cor. 1:18-20)?

5. What aspects of Christian experience does Paul point to as evidence of God's "yes" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:21-22)?

Which part is most meaningful to you now?

6. Read 2 Cor. 1:23-2:17. What further reason does Paul now give for his change of travel plans (2 Cor. 1:23-2:4)?

7. In 2 Cor. 2:5-11 Paul refers to the discipline of a member of the church, possibly because of a gross sexual sin (see 1 Cor. 5:1). How does Paul's handling of this problem affirm his love not only for the Corinthians but also for the man who had sinned?

8. Why would Paul's approach to this disciplinary problem likely result in the offender's hearing God's affirmation, his "yes," in Jesus?

9. Read 2 Cor. 2:12-17. Because Paul had no peace of mind in Troas, he couldn't take full advantage of the "door" the Lord had opened for him. How was he able to speak of his triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14) in the same breath as confessing his weakness?

When has Christ enabled you to triumph in the midst of a personal struggle?

10. What do you think Paul means in saying we are "the smell of death" to some and "the fragrance of life" to others (2 Cor. 2:15-16)?

11. How does the thought that Christianity spreads like a fragrance challenge your church or Christian group?

12. What have you learned about the conditions of receiving the affirmation Christ wants to give us?

It is as if the presence of Christ brought about the strangest of inversions: He wipes out the guilt in the woman who was crushed by it, and arouses guilt in those who felt none. (Paul Tournier)

Session #3 Jan. 17-22 Competent to Minister

2 Corinthians 3:1-18 New International Version

[1] Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? [2] You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. [3] You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

[4] Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. [5] Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. [6] He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

[7] Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, [8] will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? [9] If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! [10] For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. [11] And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

[12] Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. [13] We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. [14] But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. [15] Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. [16] But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. [18] And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

[31] "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. [32] It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. [33] "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. [34] No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Life Application Notes

3:1-3 Some false teachers had started carrying forged letters of recommendation to authenticate their authority. In no uncertain terms, Paul stated that he needed no such letters. The believers to whom Paul and his companions had preached were enough of a recommendation. Paul did use letters of introduction, however, many times. He wrote them on behalf of Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) and Timothy (1 Cor. 16:10-11). These letters helped Paul's trusted companions and friends find a welcome in various churches.

3:3 Paul uses powerful imagery from famous Old Testament passages predicting the promised day of new hearts and new beginnings for God's people (see Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 11:19; Ezekiel 36:26). No human minister can take credit for this process of conversion. It is the work of God's Spirit. We do not become believers by following some manual or using some technique. Our conversion is a result of God's implanting his Spirit in our hearts, giving us new power to live for him.

3:4-5 Paul was not boasting; he gave God the credit for all his accomplishments. While the false teachers boasted of their own power and prestige, Paul expressed his humility before God. No one can claim to be adequate without God's help. No one is competent to carry out the responsibilities of God's calling in his or her own strength. Without the Holy Spirit's enabling, our natural talent can carry us only so far. As Christ's witnesses, we need the character and special strength that only God gives.

3:6 "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" means that trying to be saved by keeping the Old Testament laws will end in death. Only by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ can a person receive eternal life through the Holy Spirit. No one but Jesus has ever fulfilled the law perfectly, and thus the whole world is condemned to death. The law makes people realize their sin, but it cannot give life. Under the new covenant, which means promise or agreement, eternal life comes from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives new life to all who believe in Christ. The moral law (Ten Commandments) still points out sin and shows us how to obey God, but forgiveness comes only through the grace and mercy of Christ (see Romans 7:10-8:2).

3:7-11 Paul contrasts the glory of the Ten Commandments with the glory of the life-giving Spirit. If the law that leads to death, was glorious, how much more glorious is God's plan to give us life through his Spirit! The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is far superior to the Old Testament system of sacrifice (see Hebrews 8; Hebrews 10 for a more complete discussion). If Christianity is superior to the Judaism of the Old Testament, which was the highest form of religion on earth, it will surely be superior to any other religion we may come across. Because God's plan is wonderful by comparison to any other, we dare not reject it or treat it casually.

3:9 Paul is saying that if the old covenant had its glory (and certainly it did), just imagine how glorious the new covenant is. The law was wonderful because, although it condemned us, it pointed us to Christ. But in the new covenant, the law and the promise are fulfilled. Christ has come-by faith we can be justified (made right with God)!

3:13-18 When Moses came down Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, his face glowed from being in God's presence (Exodus 34:29-35). Moses had to put on a veil to keep the people from being terrified by the brightness of his face. Paul adds that this veil kept them from seeing the radiance fade away. Moses and his veil illustrate the fading of the old system and the veiling of the people's minds and understanding by their pride, hardness of heart, and refusal to repent. The veil kept them from understanding the references to Christ in the Scriptures. When anyone becomes a Christian, Christ removes the veil (2 Cor. 3:16), giving eternal life and freedom from trying to be saved by keeping laws. And without the veil, we can be like mirrors reflecting God's glory.

3:17 Those who were trying to be saved by keeping the Old Testament law were soon tied up in rules and ceremonies. But now, through the Holy Spirit, God provides freedom from sin and condemnation (Romans 8:1). When we trust Christ to save us, he removes our heavy burden of trying to please him and our guilt for failing to do so. By trusting Christ we are loved, accepted, forgiven, and freed to live for him. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

3:18 The glory that the Spirit imparts to the believer is more excellent and lasts longer than the glory that Moses experienced. By gazing at the nature of God with unveiled minds, we can be more like him. In the gospel, we see the truth about Christ, and it transforms us morally as we understand and apply it. Through learning about Christ's life, we can understand how wonderful God is and what he is really like. As our knowledge deepens, the Holy Spirit helps us to change. Becoming Christlike is a progressive experience (see Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). The more closely we follow Christ, the more we will be like him.

2:14ff In the middle of discussing his unscheduled trip to Macedonia, Paul thanked God for his ministry, his relationship with the Corinthian believers, and the way God had used him to help others wherever he went, despite difficulties (2 Cor. 2:14-7:4). In 2 Cor. 7:5, Paul resumed his story of his trip to Macedonia.

2:14-16 In a Roman triumphal procession, the Roman general would display his treasures and captives amidst a cloud of incense burned for the gods. To the victors, the aroma was sweet; to the captives in the parade, it was the smell of slavery and death. When Christians preach the gospel, it is good news to some and repulsive news to others. Believers recognize the life-giving fragrance of the message. To nonbelievers, however, it smells foul, like death-their own.

2:16-17 Paul asks "who is equal" to the task of representing Christ? Our adequacy is always from God (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:5). He has already commissioned and sent us (see Matthew 28:18-20). He has given us the Holy Spirit to enable us to speak with Christ's power. He keeps his eye on us, protecting us as we work for him. So, if we realize that God makes us competent and useful, we can overcome our feelings of inadequacy. Serving Christ, therefore, requires that we focus on what he can do through us, not on what we can't do by ourselves.

2:17 Some preachers in Paul's day were "peddlers" of God's word, preaching without understanding God's message or caring about what happened to their listeners. They weren't concerned about furthering God's kingdom-they just wanted money. Today there are still religious teachers who care only about money, and not about truth. Those who truly speak for God should have sincerity and integrity, and should never preach for selfish reasons (1 Tim. 6:5-10).

31:33 God would write his law on their hearts rather than on tablets of stone, as he did the Ten Commandments. In Jeremiah 17:1 their sin was engraved on their hearts so that they wanted above all to disobey. This change seems to describe an experience very much like the new birth, with God taking the initiative. When we turn our lives over to God, he, by his Holy Spirit, builds into us the desire to obey him.

31:33 The old covenant, broken by the people, would be replaced by a new covenant. The foundation of this new covenant is Christ (Hebrews 8:6). It is revolutionary, involving not only Israel and Judah, but even the Gentiles. It offers a unique personal relationship with God himself, with his laws written on individuals' hearts instead of on stone. Jeremiah looked forward to the day when Jesus would come to establish this covenant. But for us today, this covenant is here. We have the wonderful opportunity to make a fresh start and establish a permanent, personal relationship with God (see Jeremiah 29:11; Jeremiah 32:38-40).

Session #3 Questions

Christianity is essentially a lay movement. But one would not think so while visiting the average church or watching the electronic church on TV. Often the impression we get is that ministry is for the theologically trained, the ordained, the polished and proficient. With the professionalism of ministry in our society, many of us question our ability to minister. Like Paul, we ask: "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Cor. 2:16). In this chapter Paul tells us why all believers are competent for ministry in Christ.

1. How do you feel about being told that becoming a Christian means becoming a minister?

2. Read 2 Cor. 3:1-18. In contrast to those who boasted about their letters of recommendation, Paul says the Corinthians are his letter (2 Cor. 3:1-3). What sort of letter are they?

3. How do you respond to the idea that you may be the only letter from Christ that some people ever read?

4. In 2 Cor. 2:16 Paul had asked, "Who is equal to such a task?" What answer does he give in 2 Cor. 3:4-6?

How could his answer encourage even the newest and humblest member of God's family?

5. According to Paul, how does our ministry under the New Covenant contrast with ministry under the Old (2 Cor. 3:3-6; see also Jeremiah 31:31-34)?

6. How does Paul demonstrate that ministry under the New Covenant is more glorious than ministry under the Old (2 Cor. 3:7-11)?

7. What does 2 Cor. 3:18 reveal about the process and goal of our lives as Christians under the New Covenant?

8. What evidence do you see of this glorious transformation (metamorphosis) in your life?

9. Paul speaks of our *confidence* (2 Cor. 3:4), *boldness* (2 Cor. 3:12) and *freedom* (2 Cor. 3:17). Why should each of these characterize our New Covenant ministry?

10. How has this passage encouraged you to feel competent to minister as a disciple of Jesus?

A journal entry on 2 Cor. 3:

This is an amazing philosophy of ministry! It seems to me that it ought to be that Christ is most revealed when we hide ourselves. But that is the Old Covenant with its fading glory, condemnation focus and death-

dealing impact. The New Covenant ministry is paradoxically this: as I look at Christ, and as I reveal myself, it is not I who am revealed but Christ. I am like a Kodachrome transparency. If I am looked at, one will see almost no image at all. But if I am held to the light and looked through, a beautiful image begins to appear. This is unself-conscious self-consciousness, the unselfing of the self.

Session #4 Jan. 24 – 29 This Treasure, These Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:1-5:10 New International Version

[1] Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. [2] Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. [3] And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. [4] The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. [5] For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [6] For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

[7] But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. [8] We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; [9] persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. [10] We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. [11] For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. [12] So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

[13] It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, [14] because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. [15] All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

[16] Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. [17] For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. [18] So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Chapter 5

[1] Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. [2] Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, [3] because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. [4] For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. [5] Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

[6] Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. [7] We live by faith, not by sight. [8] We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. [10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Life Application Notes

4:2 Preachers, teachers, and anyone else who talks about Jesus Christ must remember that they stand in God's presence-he hears every word. When you tell people about Christ, be careful not to distort the message to please your audience. Proclaim the truth of God's Word.

4:3-4 The gospel is open and revealed to everyone, except to those who refuse to believe. Satan is "the god of this age." His work is to deceive, and he has blinded those who don't believe in Christ (see 2 Cor. 11:14-15). The allure of money, power, and pleasure blinds people to the light of Christ's gospel. Those who reject Christ and prefer their own pursuits have unknowingly made Satan their god.

4:5 The focus of Paul's preaching was Christ and not himself. When you witness, tell people about what Christ has done, and not about your abilities and accomplishments. People must be introduced to Christ, not to you. And if you hear someone preaching himself or his own ideas rather than Christ, beware-he is a false teacher.

4:5 Paul willingly served the Corinthian church even though the people must have deeply disappointed him. Serving people requires a sacrifice of time and personal desires. Being Christ's follower means serving others, even when they do not measure up to our expectations.

4:7 The supremely valuable message of salvation in Jesus Christ has been entrusted by God to frail and fallible human beings ("jars of clay"). Paul's focus, however, was not on the perishable container but on its priceless contents-God's power dwelling in us. Though we are weak, God uses us to spread his Good News, and he gives us power to do his work. Knowing that the power is his, not ours, should keep us from pride and motivate us to keep daily contact with God, our power source. Our responsibility is to let people see God through us.

4:8-12 Paul reminds us that though we may think we are at the end of the rope, we are never at the end of hope. Our perishable bodies are subject to sin and suffering, but God never abandons us. Because Christ has won the victory over death, we have eternal life. All our risks, humiliations, and trials are opportunities for Christ to demonstrate his power and presence in and through us.

4:15-18 Paul had faced sufferings, trials, and distress as he preached the Good News. But he knew that they would one day be over, and he would obtain God's rest and rewards. As we face great troubles, it's easy to focus on the pain rather than on our ultimate goal. Just as athletes concentrate on the finish line and ignore their discomfort, we too must focus on the reward for our faith and the joy that lasts forever. No matter what happens to us in this life, we have the assurance of eternal life, when all suffering will end and all sorrow will flee away (Isaiah 35:10).

4:16 It is easy to lose heart and quit. We all have faced problems in our relationships or in our work that have caused us to want to think about laying down the tools and walking away. Rather than giving up when persecution wore him down, Paul concentrated on experiencing the inner strength from the Holy Spirit (Ephes. 3:16). Don't let fatigue, pain, or criticism force you off the job. Renew your commitment to serving Christ. Don't forsake your eternal reward because of the intensity of today's pain. Your very weakness allows the resurrection power of Christ to strengthen you moment by moment.

4:17 Our troubles should not diminish our faith or disillusion us. We should realize that there is a purpose in our suffering. Problems and human limitations have several benefits: (1) they remind us of Christ's suffering for us; (2) they keep us from pride; (3) they cause us to look beyond this brief life; (4) they prove our faith to others; and (5) they give God the opportunity to demonstrate his power. See your troubles as opportunities!

4:18 Our ultimate hope when we are experiencing terrible illness, persecution, or pain is the realization that this life is not all there is-there is life after death! Knowing that we will live forever with God in a place without sin and suffering can help us live above the pain that we face in this life.

5:1-10 Paul contrasts our earthly bodies ("earthly tent") and our future resurrection bodies ("a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands"). Paul clearly states that our present bodies make us groan, but when we die we will not be spirits without bodies ("be found naked"). We will have new bodies that will be perfect for our everlasting life.

Paul wrote as he did because the church at Corinth was in the heart of Greek culture, and many believers had difficulty with the concept of bodily resurrection. Greeks did not believe in a bodily resurrection. Most

saw the afterlife as something that happened only to the soul, with the real person imprisoned in a physical body. They believed that at death the soul is released-there is no immortality for the body, and the soul enters an eternal state. But the Bible teaches that the body and soul are not permanently separated.

Paul describes our resurrected bodies in more detail in 1 Cor. 15:46-58. We will still have personalities and recognizable characteristics in our resurrected bodies, but through Christ's work, our bodies will be better than we can imagine. The Bible does not tell us everything about our resurrected bodies, but we know they will be perfect, without sickness, disease, or pain (see Phil. 3:21; Rev. 21:4).

5:5 The Holy Spirit within us is our guarantee that God will give us everlasting bodies at the resurrection (2 Cor. 1:22). We have eternity in us now! This truth should give us great courage and patience to endure anything we might experience.

5:6-8 Paul was not afraid to die, because he was confident of spending eternity with Christ. Of course, facing the unknown may cause us anxiety, and leaving loved ones hurts deeply, but if we believe in Jesus Christ, we can share Paul's hope and confidence of eternal life with Christ.

5:8 For those who believe in Christ, death is only a prelude to eternal life with God. We will continue to live. Let this hope give you confidence and inspire you to faithful service.

5:9-10 While eternal life is a free gift given on the basis of God's grace (Ephes. 2:8-9), each of us will still be judged by Christ. This judgment will reward us for how we have lived. God's gracious gift of salvation does not free us from the requirement for faithful obedience. All Christians must give account for how they have lived (see Matthew 16:27; Romans 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Session #4 Questions

Margery Williams wrote a delightful children's story about two nursery animals, a Velveteen Rabbit (after which the book is named) and a Skin Horse, who was very old, and very wise. "What is real?" asked the Velveteen Rabbit. The Skin Horse said, "Real isn't how you are made, it is a thing that happens when you are loved for a long, long time. Generally, by the time you are real most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are REAL you can't be ugly except to those who don't understand. Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."¹

The gospel treasure is contained by people marked by weakness, frailty and a kind of living death. Paradoxically, as we shall see, this life situation serves to enhance the message we bring, not detract from it. Once real in Christ, you can't become ugly or unreal again.

1. Why do you think we find it easiest to talk about our strengths and hardest to talk about our weaknesses?

2. Read 2 Cor. 4:1-18. How does Paul's ministry contrast with the practices of evangelists who discredit the gospel (2 Cor. 4:2)?

3. What forces does Paul see at work behind those who reject and those who accept his gospel (2 Cor. 4:4-6)?

4. In what ways does Paul contrast the glory of the gospel with the weakness of those who preach it (2 Cor. 4:7-18)?

5. We often assume that our weakness will hinder the gospel and detract from it. On the contrary, how does our weakness reveal God's power?

6. How does the experience of "always being given over to death for Jesus' sake" allow the life of Jesus to be revealed in our mortal bodies (2 Cor. 4:10-12)?

7. Twice Paul has said we do not lose heart (2 Cor. 4:1, 16). On what basis can we be confident that our lives and ministry will not be pointless or fruitless (2 Cor. 4:13-18)?

8. Read 2 Cor. 5:1-10. In addition to all the troubles of this life (which Paul speaks of as "light and momentary"), there is the inevitability of death. What images does Paul use to compare the shabbiness of life now with the glory of the life to come (2 Cor. 5:1-5)?

9. How does Paul's wonderful destiny in Christ affect his view of life and death (2 Cor. 5:6-10)?

10. Why do you think many Christians in the Western world live as though they prefer to be "at home in the body" (2 Cor. 5:6), enjoying their Christian life to the maximum now?

11. The heavenly-minded have been criticized as being of no earthly use. Malcolm Muggeridge replied that only the heavenly-minded are of earthly use. Why is he closer to the truth?

12. Reviewing the entire passage, what do you now understand Paul to mean by saying "we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7)?

How can this perspective help you come to terms with your own weaknesses and mortality?

*The glory which is seen, as in a mirror, in Paul's ministry is the glory which shines through suffering. This glory consists in the fact that Paul does not despair in his sufferings, is not abandoned although persecuted, is not destroyed even when struck down. It is not a glory which enables him to avoid the suffering, just because it is the glory of the Messiah who is Jesus, the one who was crucified and raised . . . The glory of God, at which Christians look with unveiled face when they behold their fellow Christians in whom God is inaugurating the new covenant by the Spirit, is seen precisely in the paradoxical pattern of Christ, that is, the pattern of suffering and vindication.*² (N. T. Wright)

Session #5 Jan. 31 – Feb. 5 Ambassadors for Christ

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:13 New International Version

[11] Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. [12] We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. [13] If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. [14] For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. [15] And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

[16] So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. [17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! [18] All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: [19] that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. [20] We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. [21] God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Chapter 6

[1] As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. [2] For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. [3] We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. [4] Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; [5] in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; [6] in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; [7] in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; [8] through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; [9] known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; [10] sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

[11] We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. [12] We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. [13] As a fair exchange--I speak as to my children--open wide your hearts also.

Life Application Notes

5:12 Those who "take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart" are the false preachers (see 2 Cor. 2:17) who were concerned only about getting ahead in this world. They were preaching the gospel for money and popularity, while Paul and his companions were preaching out of concern for eternity. You can identify false preachers by finding out what really motivates them. If they are more concerned about themselves than about Christ, avoid them and their message.

5:13-15 Everything that Paul and his companions did was to honor God. Christ's love controlled their lives. Because Christ died for us, we also are dead to our old lives. Like Paul, we should no longer live to please ourselves; we should spend our lives pleasing Christ, who died for us and rose from the grave.

5:17 Christians are brand-new people on the *inside*. The Holy Spirit gives them new life, and they are not the same anymore. We are not reformed, rehabilitated, or reeducated—we are re-created (new creations), living in vital union with Christ (Col. 2:6-7). At conversion we are not merely turning over a new leaf; we are beginning a new life under a new Master.

5:18-19 God brings us back to himself (reconciles us) by blotting out our sins (see also Ephes. 2:13-18) and making us righteous. We are no longer God's enemies, or strangers or foreigners to him, when we trust in Christ. Because we have been reconciled to God, we have the privilege of encouraging others to do the same, and thus we are those who have the "ministry of reconciliation."

5:20 An ambassador is an official representative on behalf of one country to another. As believers, we are Christ's ambassadors, sent with his message of reconciliation to the world. An ambassador of reconciliation has an important responsibility. We dare not take this responsibility lightly. How well are you fulfilling your commission as Christ's ambassador?

5:21 When we trust in Christ, we make an exchange—our sin for his righteousness. Our sin was poured into Christ at his crucifixion. His righteousness is poured into us at our conversion. This is what Christians mean by Christ's atonement for sin. In the world, bartering works only when two people exchange goods of relatively equal value. But God offers to trade his righteousness for our sin—something of immeasurable worth for something completely worthless. How grateful we should be for his kindness to us.

6:1 How could the Corinthian believers toss aside God's message ("receive God's grace in vain")? Perhaps they were doubting Paul and his words, confused by the false teachers who taught a different message. The people heard God's message, but did not let it affect what they said and did. How often does God's message reach you in vain?

6:2 God offers salvation to all people. Many people put off a decision for Christ, thinking that there will be a better time—but they could easily miss their opportunity altogether. There is no time like the present to receive God's forgiveness. Don't let anything hold you back from coming to Christ.

6:3 In everything he did, Paul always considered what his actions communicated about Jesus Christ. If you are a believer, you are a minister for God. In the course of each day, non-Christians observe you. Don't let your careless or undisciplined actions be another person's excuse for rejecting Christ.

6:7 See Romans 13:2; 2 Cor. 10:3-5; and Ephes. 6:10-18 for more about the weapons of righteousness. Weapons for the right hand are offensive weapons; those for the left hand are defensive. No soldier is fully prepared for battle without both.

6:8-10 What a difference it makes to know Jesus! He cares for us in spite of what the world thinks. Christians don't have to give in to public opinion and pressure. Paul stood faithful to God whether people praised him or condemned him. He remained active, joyous, and content in the most difficult hardships. Don't let circumstances or people's expectations control you. Be firm as you stand true to God, and refuse to compromise his standards for living.

6:11-13 "Opened wide our hearts to you" and "not withholding our affection from you" mean that Paul had told the Corinthian believers his true feelings for them, clearly revealing how much he loved them. The Corinthians were reacting coldly to Paul's words, but Paul explained that his harsh words came from his love for them. It is easy to react against those whom God has placed over us in leadership, rather than to accept their exhortations as a sign of their love for us. We need an open rather than a closed heart toward God's messengers.

Session #5 Questions

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the emergence of the superleader under Hitler:

It is essential for the image of the Leader that the group does not see the face of the one who goes before, but sees him only from behind as the figure stepping ahead. His humanity is veiled in his Leader's form.¹

In contrast, Paul defends himself by showing his face and declaring himself defended in the gospel but defenseless in himself. In the last study Paul invited us to marvel at the contrast between the glory of the resurrection life of Jesus and these jars of clay. Now he invites us to look into his heart to see how utterly convinced he is about the gospel's message of reconciliation.

1. Think of a time when you defended yourself in the context of a strained relationship. To what did you appeal?

2. Read 2 Cor. 5:11-21. Paul defends his *ministry* and *message* of reconciliation in this passage. What accusations might Paul's opponents have made about his ministry (2 Cor. 5:11-13)?

How does Paul explain his true motives and goals (2 Cor. 5:11-14)?

3. In describing his message, Paul uses the words *reconciliation* and *reconciled* five times (2 Cor. 5:18-20). What does it mean to be reconciled to God?

4. According to Paul, what has Christ done to make reconciliation possible (2 Cor. 5:14-21)?

5. What has meant the most to you about your new relationship with God through Christ?

6. Why do you think Paul would tell the Corinthians, who are already Christians, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20)?

7. Why would the Corinthians be more likely to accept Paul as God's messenger if they fully accepted the message he preached?

8. Read 2 Cor. 6:1-13. What would it mean for the Corinthians-or us today-to receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1)?

9. To what further credentials does Paul point in order to commend himself to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 6:3-10)?

With which of these can you personally identify? Explain.

10. Why would such a paradoxical list of credentials remove rather than place stumbling-blocks before people trying to find their way to God?

11. Reviewing 2 Cor. 5:11-6:13 as a whole, what is Paul's strategy as an ambassador for Christ?

12. How might Paul's example help us be more effective ambassadors, especially to people who are "turned off" by Christianity?

*Referring to the words of Charles Wesley's familiar hymn, James Denney says, "It is the voice of God, no less than that of the sinner, which says, 'Thou, O Christ, art all I want; more than all in Thee I find.' "*²

¹Quoted in Ray Anderson, *Minding God's Business* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 5.

²James Denney, *A Man In Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 243.

Session #6 Feb. 7-12 Good Grief

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:16 New International Version

[14] Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? [15] What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? [16] What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

[17] "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." [18] "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Chapter 7

[1] Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

[2] Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. [3] I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. [4] I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

[5] For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn-- conflicts on the outside, fears within. [6] But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, [7] and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever.

[8] Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it--I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while-- [9] yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. [10] Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. [11] See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. [12] So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. [13] By all this we are encouraged.

In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. [14] I had boasted to him about you, and you have not embarrassed me. But just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting about you to Titus has proved to be true as well. [15] And his affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. [16] I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.

Life Application Notes

6:14-18 Paul urges believers not to form binding relationships with nonbelievers, because this might weaken their Christian commitment, integrity, or standards. It would be a mismatch. Earlier, Paul had explained that this did not mean isolating oneself from nonbelievers (see 1 Cor. 5:9-10). Paul even tells Christians to stay with their nonbelieving spouses (1 Cor. 7:12-13). Paul wants believers to be active in their witness for Christ to nonbelievers, but they should not lock themselves into personal or business relationships that could cause them to compromise the faith. Believers should do everything in their power to avoid situations that could force them to divide their loyalties.

6:15 Belial is a name that Paul uses for Satan. For those who have discovered God's light, there can be no fellowship or compromise with the darkness (1 Cor. 10:20-21).

6:17 Separation from the world involves more than keeping our distance from sinners; it means staying close to God (see 2 Cor. 7:1-2). It involves more than avoiding entertainment that leads to sin; it extends into how we spend our time and money. There is no way to separate ourselves totally from all sinful influences. Nevertheless, we are to resist the sin around us, without either giving up or giving in.

7:1 Purifying ourselves is a twofold action: turning *away* from sin, and turning *toward* God. "Perfecting holiness" means that the Corinthians were to have nothing to do with paganism. They were to make a clean break with their past and give themselves to God alone.

7:5 Here Paul resumed the story that he left in 2 Cor. 2:13, where he said he went to Macedonia to look for Titus. Though Paul still had many problems and hardships to face, he still found comfort and joy in the progress of the ministry.

7:8ff "My letter" refers to the third letter (now lost) that Paul had written to the Corinthians. Apparently it had caused the people to begin to change. For an explanation of the chronology of Paul's letters to Corinth, see the first note on +2 Cor. 1:1.

7:10 "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation" refers to the sorrow for our sins that results in changed behavior. Many people are sorry only for the effects of their sins or for being caught ("worldly sorrow"). Compare Peter's remorse and repentance with Judas's bitterness and act of suicide. Both disowned Christ. One repented and was restored to faith and service; the other took his own life.

7:11 It is difficult to be confronted with our sin, and even more difficult to get rid of sin. Paul praised the Corinthians for clearing up an especially troublesome situation (see the note on +2 Cor. 2:5-11). Do you tend to be defensive when confronted? Don't let pride keep you from admitting your sins. Accept correction as a tool for your growth, and do all you can to correct problems that are pointed out to you.

Session #6 Questions

A great theologian once said, "to be a sinner is our distress, but to know it, is our hope!" Paul would say "Amen." In the last two studies we explored the extraordinary openness demonstrated by the apostle in revealing his own hurts, struggles and weaknesses. His argument for Christian vulnerability is incontestable. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain if we are in Christ and walking into the light. But the Corinthians had been equivocating in their handling of an internal scandal. They were tempted to cover it up and not to call it sin. In response, Paul patiently and effectively ministered to the Corinthians, urging them not to cover up the problem. The result was what Paul calls godly sorrow, a subject we will explore in this study.

1. Recall an experience of deep sorrow, possibly a significant loss, hurt or disappointment. What were some of the good things, if any, that came after the sorrow had passed?
2. Read 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1. This passage is usually understood to apply to marriages between believers and unbelievers. However, what other types of close relationships or partnerships might Paul have in mind?
3. What reasons does Paul give for avoiding such unions (2 Cor. 6:14-16)?
4. How might such relationships lead to disharmony, conflict and compromise?
5. Although we may forfeit certain relationships, what positive promises does the Lord give us (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1)?
6. What difference should our relationship with God make when we contemplate marriage or other close relationships (2 Cor. 6:17; 2 Cor. 7:1)?
7. It is often counterproductive to try to persuade someone not to marry a person they deeply love, even if the intended partner is unsuitable. What clues does this passage give us for ministering to someone who is tempted to marry outside the faith?

8. Read 2 Cor. 7:2-16. Paul now recalls how comforted he was when he met Titus in Macedonia and heard news of the Corinthians. What makes Paul so "confident," "proud" and "encouraged" (2 Cor. 7:4) about the Corinthians?

9. Referring to their response to his "sorrowful letter" (2 Cor. 7:8), Paul compares worldly sorrow with godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:9-10). What are the positive indications and constructive results of godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10-11)?

What makes worldly sorrow so destructive?

10. In dealing with a disciplinary matter, such as the marriage of a believer to a nonbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1), what approach would be most likely to lead to worldly sorrow?

11. If godly sorrow is so beneficial, why do you think most Christians shrink from the relational work, discipline and tough love that are required to bring it about in others?

12. In what areas of your life are you most in need of godly sorrow?

What will you do about this?

Session #7 Feb. 14 – 19 The Need to Give

2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15 New International Version

[1] And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. [2] Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. [3] For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, [4] they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. [5] And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. [6] So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. [7] But just as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

[8] I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. [9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

[10] And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. [11] Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. [12] For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

[13] Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. [14] At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, [15] as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

[16] I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. [17] For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. [18] And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. [19] What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. [20] We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. [21] For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

[22] In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. [23] As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. [24] Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

Chapter 9

[1] There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. [2] For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. [3] But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. [4] For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we--not to say anything about you--would be ashamed of having been so confident. [5] So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

[6] Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. [7] Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. [8] And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. [9] As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever."

[10] Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. [11] You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

[12] This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. [13] Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. [14] And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. [15] Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Life Application Notes

8:1ff Paul, writing from Macedonia, hoped that news of the generosity of these churches would encourage the Corinthian believers and motivate them to solve their problems and unite in fellowship.

8:2-5 During his third missionary journey, Paul had collected money for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. The churches in Macedonia-Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea-had given money even though they

were poor, and they had given more than Paul expected. This was sacrificial giving—they were poor themselves, but they wanted to help. The point of giving is not so much the amount we give, but why and how we give. God does not want gifts given grudgingly. Instead, he wants us to give as these churches did—out of dedication to Christ, love for fellow believers, the joy of helping those in need, as well as the fact that it was simply the good and right thing to do. How well does your giving measure up to the standards set by the Macedonian churches?

8:3-6 The kingdom of God spreads through believers' concern and eagerness to help others. Here we see several churches joining to help others beyond their own circle of friends and their own city. Explore ways that you might link up with a ministry outside your city, either through your church or through a Christian organization. By joining with other believers to do God's work, you increase Christian unity and help the kingdom grow.

8:7-8 The Corinthian believers excelled in everything—they had faith, good preaching (speech), much knowledge, much earnestness, much love. Paul wanted them to also be leaders in giving. Giving is a natural response of love. Paul did not order the Corinthians to give, but he encouraged them to prove that their love was sincere. When you love someone, you want to give him or her your time and attention and to provide for his or her needs. If you refuse to help, your love is not as genuine as you say.

8:9 There is no evidence that Jesus was any poorer than most first-century Palestinians; rather, Jesus became poor by giving up his rights as God and becoming human. In his incarnation God voluntarily became man—the wholly human person, Jesus of Nazareth. As a man, Jesus was subject to place, time, and other human limitations. He did not give up his eternal power when he became human, but he did set aside his glory and his rights (see the note on +Phil. 2:5-7). In response to the Father's will, he limited his power and knowledge. Christ became "poor" when he became human, because he set aside so much. Yet by doing so, he made us "rich" because we received salvation and eternal life.

What made Jesus' humanity unique was his freedom from sin. In his full humanity, we can see everything about God's character that can be conveyed in human terms. The incarnation is explained further in these Bible passages: John 1:1-14; Romans 1:2-5; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 1:1-3.

8:10-15 The Corinthian church had money, and apparently they had planned to collect money for the Jerusalem churches a year previously (see also 2 Cor. 9:2). Paul challenges them to act on their plans. Four principles of giving emerge here: (1) your willingness to give cheerfully is more important than the amount you give; (2) you should strive to fulfill your financial commitments; (3) if you give to others in need, they will, in turn, help you when you are in need; (4) you should give as a response to Christ, not for anything you can get out of it. How you give reflects your devotion to Christ.

8:12 How do you decide how much to give? What about differences in the financial resources Christians have? Paul gives the Corinthian church several principles to follow: (1) each person should follow through on previous promises (2 Cor. 8:10-11; 2 Cor. 9:3); (2) each person should give as much as he or she is able (2 Cor. 8:12; 2 Cor. 9:6); (3) each person must make up his or her own mind how much to give (2 Cor. 9:7); and (4) each person should give in proportion to what God has given him or her (2 Cor. 9:10). God gives to us so that we can give to others.

8:12 Paul says that we should give of what we have, not what we don't have. Sacrificial giving must be responsible. Paul wants believers to give generously, but not to the extent that those who depend on the givers (their families, for example) must go without having their basic needs met. Give until it hurts, but don't give so that it hurts your family and/or relatives who need your financial support.

8:18-21 Another "brother" was traveling with Paul and Titus, a man who was elected by the churches to also take the large financial gift to Jerusalem. Paul explained that by traveling together there could be no suspicion and people would know that the gift was being handled honestly. The church did not need to worry that the bearers of the collection would misuse the money.

9:3-5 Paul reminded the Corinthians to fulfill the commitment that they had already made (see also 2 Cor. 8:10-12). They had said that they would collect a financial gift to send to the church in Jerusalem. Paul was sending a few men ahead of him to make sure their gift was ready, so it would be a real gift and not look like people had to give under pressure at the last minute ("ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given"). He was holding them accountable to keep their promise, so that neither Paul nor the Corinthians would be embarrassed.

9:6-8 People may hesitate to give generously to God if they worry about having enough money left over to meet their own needs. Paul assured the Corinthians that God was able to meet their needs. The person who gives only a little will receive only a little in return. Don't let a lack of faith keep you from giving freely and generously.

9:7 Our attitude when we give is more important than the amount we give. We don't have to be embarrassed if we can give only a small gift. God is concerned about *how* we give from the resources we have (see Mark 12:41-44). According to that standard, the giving of the Macedonian churches would be difficult to match (2 Cor. 8:3).

9:10 God gives us resources to use and invest for him. Paul uses the illustration of seed to explain that the resources God gives us are not to be hidden, foolishly devoured, or thrown away. Instead, they should be cultivated in order to produce more crops. When we invest what God has given us in his work, he will provide us with even more to give in his service.

9:12-15 Paul emphasizes the spiritual rewards for those who give generously to God's work. We should not expect to become wealthy through giving. Those who receive your gifts will be helped, will praise God, and will pray for you. As you bless others, you will be blessed.

Session #7 Questions

The privacy of the purse makes it extremely difficult for Christians to talk about their money. The fig leaf has slipped from the genitals to the wallet. The problem is compounded by hard-sell media evangelists raising funds for their personal empires. But Paul devotes two whole chapters to the grace of giving, because both he and the Corinthians have a problem in this area.

Paul has been tramping throughout the gentile churches raising money for the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, many of whom have lost their jobs and homes for the faith. But the Corinthians haven't produced a red cent! That is *their* problem, because they are denying themselves the joy of "this grace of giving" (2 Cor. 8:7). Paul's problem is that he has been boasting to the Macedonians (Philippi and Thessalonica) about how much the Corinthians were going to give (2 Cor. 9:2-3). As Paul sets out to resolve this problem, he meets not only the Corinthians' need to give but ours as well.

1. What positive and negative feelings do you have about people raising money for a Christian cause?

2. Read 2 Cor. 8:1-9:5. What methods does Paul use to encourage the Corinthians to give to the poverty-stricken Christians in Jerusalem?

3. In what ways are the Macedonians excellent examples of generosity (2 Cor. 8:1-5)?

Why is Jesus Christ the supreme example of sacrificial giving (2 Cor. 8:9)?

4. In both chapters Paul refrains from using the word *money*. Instead he speaks of *sharing* (2 Cor. 8:4; 2 Cor. 9:13), *service* (2 Cor. 8:4, 18; 2 Cor. 9:1, 12-13), *offering* (2 Cor. 8:19), *grace* (2 Cor. 8:6-7) and *gift* (2 Cor. 8:12, 20; 2 Cor. 9:5). What insights do these words give us into the nature of giving?

5. Paul never raised money for himself, for his own missionary organization or even for Corinth Community Church. What is the primary goal that governs his appeal for gifts (2 Cor. 8:10-15)?

What should the principle of equality mean to us as we consider our bond with believers throughout the world?

6. What care does Paul take to avoid any suspicion of dishonesty or self-interest as he handles this large gift (2 Cor. 8:16-24)?

What would be an equivalent strategy in our own day?

7. Read 2 Cor. 9:6-15. Some people teach that giving money to the Lord's work results in your getting more money yourself. What does Paul say about the personal benefits of giving (2 Cor. 9:6-11)?

8. In addition to meeting their material needs, what benefits does our giving produce in others (2 Cor. 9:12-14)?

9. Paul encourages *cheerful* giving (2 Cor. 9:7). The word is the root of our English *hilarious*. It is the exact opposite of calculated giving under compulsion. According to these two chapters, how could you become a more cheerful giver?

10. What difference will this study make in the stewardship of your resources?

11. How should these chapters guide the planning of your church budget?

(No class next week because of Ash Wednesday) Please come to Ash Wed. services.

Session #8 Feb. 28 – March 4 Spiritual Warfare

2 Corinthians 10:1-18 New International Version

[1] By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you--I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" when away! [2] I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. [3] For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. [4] The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. [5] We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. [6] And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

[7] You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he. [8] For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it. [9] I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. [10] For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." [11] Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.

[12] We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. [13] We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. [14] We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. [15] Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, [16] so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory. [17] But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." [18] For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Life Application Notes

10:1-2 Paul's opponents questioned his authority. From 2 Cor. 7:8-16 we know that the majority of Corinthian believers sided with Paul. However, a minority continued to slander him, saying that he was bold in his letters but had no authority in person. 2 Cor. 10-13 are Paul's response to this charge.

10:3-6 We, like Paul, are merely weak humans, but we don't need to use human plans and methods to win our battles. God's mighty weapons are available to us as we fight against Satan's "strongholds." The Christian must choose whose methods to use, God's or the world's. Paul assures us that God's mighty weapons--prayer, faith, hope, love, God's Word, the Holy Spirit--are powerful and effective (see Ephes. 6:13-18)! These weapons can break down the proud human arguments against God and the walls that Satan builds to keep people from finding God. When dealing with the pride that keeps people from a relationship with Christ, we may be tempted to use our own methods. But nothing can break down these barriers like God's weapons.

10:5 Paul uses military terminology to describe this warfare against sin and Satan. God must be the commander in chief--even our thoughts must be submitted to his control as we live for him.

10:7-9 Those who opposed Paul portrayed him as weak and powerless, but Paul reminded the Corinthians that he claimed the power and authority of Christ. False teachers were encouraging the believers to ignore Paul, but Paul explained that the words in his letters were to be taken seriously. Paul had authority because he and

his companions were the first to bring the Good News to Corinth (2 Cor. 10:14). On the basis of this authority over them, Paul wrote to them to help them grow.

10:10 Some said that Paul's speaking amounted to nothing. Greece was known for its eloquent and persuasive orators. Evidently, some were judging Paul by comparing him to other speakers they had heard, and Paul was perhaps not the most powerful preacher (although he was an excellent debater). But Paul responded obediently to God's call and thus introduced Christianity to the Roman empire. Moses and Jeremiah also had problems with speaking (see Exodus 4:10-12; Jeremiah 1:6). Preaching ability is not the first prerequisite of a great leader!

10:12-13 Paul criticized the false teachers who were trying to prove their goodness by comparing themselves with others rather than with God's standards. When we compare ourselves with others, we may feel pride because we think we're better. But when we measure ourselves against God's standards, it becomes obvious that we have no basis for pride. Don't worry about other people's accomplishments. Instead, continually ask: How does my life measure up to what God wants? How does my life compare to Jesus Christ?

10:17-18 When we do something well, we want to tell others and be recognized. But recognition is dangerous—it can lead to inflated pride. How much better it is to seek the praise of God rather than the praise of people. Then, when we receive praise, we will be free to give God the credit. What should you change about the way you live in order to receive God's commendation?

Session #8 Study Questions

Sometimes when things seem to be getting better we hear news that the situation is worse than we thought. While Paul was writing this letter, or after completing and sending 2 Cor. 1-9, he got fresh news that some outside leaders, some so-called "super-apostles," had usurped his rightful place. The tone of the letter becomes more assertive and passionate. Now Paul engages in spiritual warfare with principalities, powers and persons who oppose not only Paul but Christ himself. Unlike many of us, Paul wants to make peace, not keep the peace by covering over the problem. We have much to learn from Paul's pastoral strategy.

1. In your opinion, what qualities characterize successful people?

2. Read 2 Cor. 10:1-18. What apparent disadvantages did Paul suffer in comparison to his opponents in Corinth? (See especially 2 Cor. 10:1, 9.)

3. Paul says he is not waging war "as the world does" (2 Cor. 10:3). What types of worldly weapons and strategies do you think he has in mind?

In what situations are we tempted to use these tactics today?

4. What is Paul's strategy in this spiritual warfare (2 Cor. 10:4-6)?

5. Trace, in 2 Cor. 10:7, 10, the arguments of Paul's opponents.

Why must Paul "demolish" their arguments and pretensions?

6. What similar arguments and pretensions oppose the knowledge of God today?

7. How can we demolish these strongholds in our churches, neighborhoods and workplaces?

8. Which of your own thoughts need to be "taken captive" (2 Cor. 10:6) to obedience to Christ?

9. When our ministry is successful, we may be tempted to boast. How many times is the word *boast* used in 2 Cor. 10:7-18?

What is wrong with the boasting of Paul's opponents?

10. According to Paul, what is the proper way to determine the success of our ministry?

Session #9 March 6 – 11 Super-Apostles, Super-Leaders

2 Corinthians 11:1-33 New International Version

[1] I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. [2] I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. [3] But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. [4] For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. [5] But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." [6] I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

[7] Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? [8] I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. [9] And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. [10] As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. [11] Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! [12] And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order

to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

[13] For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. [14] And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. [15] It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

[16] I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. [17] In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. [18] Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. [19] You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! [20] In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. [21] To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

What anyone else dares to boast about--I am speaking as a fool--I also dare to boast about. [22] Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. [23] 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. [24] Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. [25] 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, [26] 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. [27] 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. [28] Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. [29] Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

[30] If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. [31] The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. [32] In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. [33] But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

Life Application Notes

11:1 Paul asked the Corinthian believers to bear with him as he talked a little "foolishness." In other words, Paul felt foolish rehearsing his credentials as a preacher of the gospel (2 Cor. 11:16-21). But he thought that he had to do this in order to silence the false teachers (2 Cor. 11:13).

11:2 Paul was anxious that the church's love should be for Christ alone, just as a pure virgin saves her love for one man only. By "virgin" he meant one who was unaffected by false doctrine.

11:3 The Corinthians' sincere and pure devotion to Christ was being threatened by false teaching. Paul did not want the believers to lose their single-minded love for Christ. Keeping Christ first in our lives can be very difficult when we have so many distractions threatening to sidetrack our faith. Just as Eve lost her focus by listening to the serpent, we too can lose our focus by letting our lives become overcrowded and confused. Is there anything that weakens your commitment to keep Christ first in your life? How can you minimize the distractions that threaten your devotion to him?

11:3-4 The Corinthian believers fell for smooth talk and messages that sounded good and seemed to make sense. Today there are many false teachings that seem to make sense. Don't believe someone simply because he or she sounds like an authority or says words you like to hear. Search the Bible and check his or her teachings against God's Word. The Bible should be your authoritative guide. Don't listen to any "authoritative preacher" who contradicts God's Word.

11:4 The false teachers distorted the truth about Jesus and ended up preaching a different Jesus, a different spirit than the Holy Spirit, and a different gospel than God's way of salvation. Because the Bible is God's infallible Word, those who teach anything different from what it says are both mistaken and misleading.

11:5 Paul was saying that these marvelous teachers ("super-apostles") were no better than he was. They may have been more eloquent speakers, but they spoke lies and were servants of Satan.

11:6 Paul, a brilliant thinker, was not a trained, spellbinding speaker. Although his ministry was effective (see Acts 17), he had not been trained in the Greek schools of oratory and speechmaking, as many of the false teachers probably had been. Paul believed in a simple presentation of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 1:17), and some people thought this showed simple-mindedness. Thus Paul's speaking performance was often used against him by false teachers. In all our teaching and preaching, content is far more important than the presentation. A simple, clear presentation that helps listeners understand will be of great value.

11:7 The Corinthians may have thought that preachers could be judged by how much money they demand. A good speaker would charge a large sum, a fair speaker would be a little cheaper, and a poor speaker would speak for free. The false teachers may have argued that because Paul asked no fee for his preaching, he must have been an amateur, with little authority or competence. Believers today must be careful not to assume that every speaker who is well known and demands a large honorarium is superior at explaining and applying God's Word.

11:7-12 Paul could have asked the Corinthian church for financial support. Jesus himself taught that those who minister for God should be supported by the people to whom they minister (Matthew 10:10). But Paul thought that asking for support in Corinth might be misunderstood. There were many false teachers who hoped to make a good profit from preaching (2 Cor. 2:17), and Paul might look like one of them. Paul separated himself completely from those false teachers in order to silence those who only claimed to do God's work.

11:14-15 One Jewish writing (the Apocalypse of Moses) says that the story of Eve's temptation includes Satan masquerading as an angel. Paul may have been thinking of this story, or he could have been referring to Satan's typical devices. In either case, nothing could be more deceitful than Satan, the prince of darkness (Ephes. 6:12; Col. 1:13), disguising himself as an angel of light. In the same way, when the false teachers were claiming to represent Christ as servants of righteousness, they were lying shamelessly.

11:14-15 Satan and his servants can deceive us by appearing to be attractive, good, and moral. Many unsuspecting people follow smooth-talking, Bible-quoting leaders into cults that alienate them from their families and lead them into the practice of immorality and deceit. Don't be fooled by external appearances. Our impressions alone are not an accurate indicator of who is or isn't a true follower of Christ; so it helps to ask these questions: (1) Do the teachings confirm Scripture (Acts 17:11)? (2) Does the teacher affirm and proclaim that Jesus Christ is God who came into the world as a man to save people from their sins (1 John 4:1-3)? (3) Is the teacher's life-style consistent with Biblical morality (Matthew 12:33-37)?

11:22-23 Paul presented his credentials to counteract the charges that the false teachers were making against him. He felt foolish boasting like this, but his list of credentials would silence any doubts about his authority. Paul wanted to keep the Corinthians from slipping under the spell of the false teachers and turning away from the gospel. Paul also gave a list of his credentials in his letter to the Philippians (see Phil. 3:4-8).

11:23-29 Paul was angry that the false teachers had impressed and deceived the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Therefore, he had to reestablish his credibility and authority by listing the trials he had endured in his service for Christ. Some of these trials are recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 14:19; Acts 16:22-24). Because Paul wrote this letter during his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23-21:17), his trials weren't over. He would experience yet further difficulties and humiliations for the cause of Christ (see Acts 21:30-33; Acts 22:24-30). Paul was sacrificing his life for the gospel, something the false teachers would never do. The trials and hurts

we experience for Christ's sake build our character, demonstrate our faith, and prepare us for further service to the Lord.

11:25 Sea travel was not as safe as it is today. Paul had been shipwrecked three times, and he would face another accident on his voyage to Rome (see Acts 27). By this time, Paul had probably made at least eight or nine voyages.

11:28-29 Not only did Paul face beatings and dangers, he also carried the daily concern for the young churches, worrying that they were staying true to the gospel and free from false teachings and inner strife. Paul was concerned for individuals in the churches he served. If God has placed you in a position of leadership and authority, treat people with Paul's kind of empathy and concern.

11:32 King Aretas, king of the Nabateans (Edomites) from 9 B.C. to A.D. 40, had appointed a governor to oversee the Nabatean segment of the population in Damascus. Somehow the Jews in Damascus had been able to enlist this governor to help them try to capture Paul (see Acts 9:22-25). Paul gave a "for instance" here, describing his escape from Damascus in a basket lowered from a window in the city wall. Paul recounted this incident to show what he had endured for Christ. The false teachers couldn't make such claims.

Session #9 Questions

In his book *Servant Leadership* Robert K. Greenleaf wrote, "We live in the age of the anti-leader, and our vast educational structure devotes little care to nurturing leaders or to understanding followership."¹

Most people in the Western world are double-minded about leadership-fascinated but fearful, wanting strong leadership but guarding themselves from it by protective fences. In this chapter Paul continues to respond to the fresh news he has from Corinth. He not only shows how the super-apostles are not their true leaders, but also gives us a basis for identifying real Christian leadership.

1. What feelings do you get when you hear that a charismatic leader is accumulating a huge following?

2. Read 2 Cor. 11. What are Paul's motives for challenging the so-called super-apostles who are winning over the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:1-6)?

3. How does Paul express his long-term goal of ministry in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:2-3)?

Why do you think betrothal rather than marriage is such a good image of the goal of Christian ministry?

4. Why do you think Paul's decision to "preach the gospel free of charge" was so important in defending his ministry (2 Cor. 11:7-12)?

5. When would it be right for a Christian leader to be financially supported by his followers?

6. Looking at the whole chapter (2 Cor. 11), what marks of the super-apostles justified Paul's description of them as *false, deceitful and masquerading*?

What kind of Christian leadership today might fall under the apostle's judgment?

7. The Corinthians might not have agreed with Paul's assessment of the super-apostles. What words might they have used to describe their experience of being led by these charismatic giants?

8. In contrast, what does Paul boast about as the mark of his own leadership (2 Cor. 11:16-33)?

Why would his escape from Damascus (2 Cor. 11:32-33) be such a good example of this?

9. What have you learned from this study about the marks of true Christian leadership?

10. What have you learned about being a healthy follower?

Session #10 March 13 – 18 My Burden Carries Me

2 Corinthians 12:1-21 New International Version

[1] I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. [2] I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. [3] And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- [4] was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. [5] I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. [6] Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

[7] To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. [9] But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. [10] That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

[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. [12] The things that mark an

apostle--signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance. [13] How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

[14] 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. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. [15] 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? [16] Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! [17] Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? [18] 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?

[19] 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. [20] 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. [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.

Life Application Notes

12:2-3 Paul continued his "boasting" by telling about visions and revelations he had received from the Lord. "I know a man in Christ" means that he was speaking about himself. He explained that he didn't know if he was taken up in his body or in his spirit, but he was in paradise ("the third heaven"). This incident cannot be positively identified with a recorded event in Paul's career, although some think this may have been when he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20). Paul told about this incident to show that he had been uniquely touched by God.

12:7-8 We don't know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, because he doesn't tell us. Some have suggested that it was malaria, epilepsy, or a disease of the eyes (see Galatians 4:13-15). Whatever the case, it was a chronic and debilitating problem, which at times kept him from working. This thorn was a hindrance to his ministry, and he prayed for its removal; but God refused. Paul was a very self-sufficient person, so this thorn must have been difficult for him. It kept Paul humble, reminded him of his need for constant contact with God, and benefited those around him as they saw God at work in his life.

12:9 Although God did not remove Paul's physical affliction, he promised to demonstrate his power in Paul. The fact that God's power is displayed in weak people should give us courage. Though we recognize our limitations, we will not congratulate ourselves and rest at that. Instead, we will turn to God to seek pathways for effectiveness. We must rely on God for our effectiveness rather than simply on our own energy, effort, or talent. Our weakness not only helps develop Christian character; it also deepens our worship, because in admitting our weakness, we affirm God's strength.

12:10 When we are strong in abilities or resources, we are tempted to do God's work on our own, and that can lead to pride. When we are weak, allowing God to fill us with *his* power, then we are stronger than we could ever be on our own. God does not intend for us to seek to be weak, passive, or ineffective--life provides enough hindrances and setbacks without us creating them. When those obstacles come, we must depend on God. Only his power will make us effective for him and will help us do work that has lasting value.

12:11-15 Paul was not merely revealing his feelings; he was defending his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul was hurt that the church in Corinth doubted and questioned him, so he defended himself for the cause of the gospel, not to satisfy his ego. When you are "put on trial," do you think only about saving your reputation or are you more concerned about what people will think about Christ?

12:13 Paul explained that the only thing he did for the other churches that he didn't do in Corinth was to become a burden--to ask the believers to feed and house him. When he said, "Forgive me this wrong," he was

clearly being sarcastic. He actually did more for the Corinthians than for any other church, but still they misunderstood him.

12:14 Paul had founded the church in Corinth on his first visit there (Acts 18:1). He subsequently made a second visit (2 Cor. 2:1). He was planning what would be his third visit (see also 2 Cor. 13:1). Paul explained that, as before, he didn't want to be paid, fed, or housed; he only wanted the believers to be nourished with the spiritual food he would feed them.

12:16-19 Although Paul asked nothing of the Corinthian believers, some doubters were still saying that Paul must have been crafty and made money from them somehow. But Paul again explained that everything he did for the believers was for their edification, not to enrich himself.

12:20-21 After reading this catalog of sins, it is hard to believe that these are the people that Paul said possessed great gifts and excelled as leaders (2 Cor. 8:7). Paul feared that the practices of wicked Corinth had invaded the congregation. He wrote sternly, hoping that they would straighten out their lives before he arrived. We must live differently than unbelievers, not letting secular society dictate how we are to treat others. Don't let culture invade your practices at church.

Session #10 Questions

Unintentionally a German philosopher captured the genius of Paul's spirituality with these arresting words: "My burden carries me." Normally we think about the difficulty of carrying our burdens. But in reality our burdens carry us to Christ by convincing us that we are not self-sufficient. They are spiritual assets, not liabilities. "When I am weak, then I am strong" is Paul's final distinction between super-spirituality and the real thing.

1. How do you react when a person shares spiritual experiences that seem completely beyond your reach?

2. Read 2 Cor. 12:1-10. Paul describes his experience of being caught up to paradise by referring to "a man in Christ" (2 Cor. 12:1-6). Why do you think he refrains from boasting about such an exalted experience?

On what basis does Paul believe he should be evaluated by the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:6)?

3. Opinions concerning Paul's "thorn in my flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) range from eye disease (Acts 9:9; Galatians 4:15) to defective speech to his ever-present opponents.¹ While no conclusive answer can be given about the details, what do we know about this bitter reality Paul faced?

How does Paul view Satan's part and God's part in his "thorn"?

4. What was accomplished by Paul's repeated prayer to God for the removal of his thorn?

What do we learn from this about the value of persistent prayer in relation to our handicaps, weaknesses and problems?

5. In contrast to Paul's ecstatic experiences, the simple answer to his prayer (2 Cor. 12:9) is considered to be the summit from which we gain the most complete view of Paul's apostleship. What affect did this answer have on Paul himself?

What help do the Lord's words give us in responding to the health, wealth and success gospel that is widely marketed today?

6. In what ways can you envision God taking something evil or destructive in your life and making it serve a good purpose?

7. Read 2 Cor. 12:11-21. To what credentials does Paul point while pleading for his rightful place in the Corinthians' hearts?

8. Paul mentions five times that he has not been a burden to the Corinthians nor has he exploited them. How does he explain his motives for refusing financial support from them?

9. Earlier Paul mentioned his concern about the Corinthians being led astray by a different gospel (2 Cor. 11:1-5). What connection do you see between that false gospel and the other concerns Paul expresses in 2 Cor. 12:20-21?

10. Reviewing the whole chapter (2 Cor. 12, what kind of weaknesses or problems can we legitimately expect God to transform into a means of grace?

What kinds of problems or weaknesses should we not expect God to transform?

In Paul's case the power to accept the sufficiency of God's grace only came in the course of an importunate prayer aiming to turn God's hand. Paul ended, rather than began with "Thy will be done." The peace of God is an end and not a beginning.²

Session #11 March 20 - 25 Examine Yourselves

2 Corinthians 13:1-14 New International Version

[1] This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." [2] 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, [3] since you are

demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. [4] 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.

[5] 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? [6] And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. [7] 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. [8] For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. [9] We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection. [10] 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.

[11] 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.

[12] Greet one another with a holy kiss. [13] All the saints send their greetings.

[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.

Life Application Notes

13:2 When Paul arrived the third time in Corinth, he would not be lenient toward unrepentant sinners. His actions could include (1) confronting and publicly denouncing their behavior; (2) exercising church discipline by calling them before the church leaders; or (3) excommunicating them from the church.

13:5 The Corinthians were called to examine and test themselves to see if they really were Christians. Just as we get physical check-ups, Paul urges us to give ourselves spiritual checkups. We should look for a growing awareness of Christ's presence and power in our lives. Only then will we know if we are true Christians or merely imposters. If we're not taking active steps to grow closer to God, we are drawing further away from him.

13:8-9 Just as parents want their children to grow into mature adults, so Paul wanted the Corinthians to grow into mature believers. As we share the gospel, our goal should be not merely to see others profess faith or begin attending church, but to see them become mature in their faith. Don't set your sights too low.

13:11 Paul's closing words--what he wanted the Corinthians to remember about the needs facing their church--are still fitting for the church today. When these qualities are not present, there are problems that must be dealt with. These traits do not come to a church by glossing over problems, conflicts, and difficulties. They are not produced by neglect, denial, withdrawal, or bitterness. They are the by-products of the extremely hard work of solving problems. Just as Paul and the Corinthians had to hammer out difficulties to bring peace, so we must *apply* the principles of God's Word and not just hear them.

13:14 Paul's farewell blessing invokes all three members of the Trinity--Father (God), Son (Lord Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit. Although the term *Trinity* is not explicitly used in Scripture, verses such as this one show that it was believed and experienced through knowing God's grace, love, and fellowship. See Luke 1:35--the angel Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary; Matthew 3:17--the Father's voice was heard at the baptism of Jesus; and Matthew 28:19--Jesus' commission to the disciples.

13:14 Paul was dealing with an ongoing problem in the Corinthian church. He could have refused to communicate until they cleared up their situation, but he loved them and reached out to them again with the love of Christ.

Love, however, means that sometimes we must confront those we care about. Both authority and personal concern are needed in dealing with people who are ruining their lives with sin. But there are several wrong approaches in confronting others, and these can further break relationships rather than heal them. We can be legalistic and blast people away with the laws they should be obeying. We can turn away from them because

we don't want to face the situation. We can isolate them by gossiping about their problem and turning others against them as well.

Or, like Paul, we can seek to build relationships by taking a better approach-sharing, communicating, and caring. This is a difficult approach that can drain us emotionally, but it is the best way for the other person, and it is the only Christlike way to deal with others' sin.

Session 11 Questions

Imagine life without a final examination. At first it strikes us as a wonderful vacation, like school without tests and report cards. But without accountability life quickly loses its meaning. The whole Bible looks towards the final Day with vibrant hope. Those genuinely in Christ have nothing to fear and everything to anticipate. But what of those who are not sure, or who like the Corinthians might have false confidence about the outcome of the final exam? Paul deals with this matter in his final passionate plea.

1. How does the thought of preparing for an exam usually strike you? Explain.

2. Read 2 Cor. 13:1-14. What can the Corinthians expect from Paul's third visit (2 Cor. 13:1-3, 10)?

3. What proof can Paul give that Christ is really speaking through him (2 Cor. 13:3-4)?

4. 2 Cor. 13:4 sums up the whole book. Why does the cross represent the heart of what Paul has been saying to the Corinthians?

In what ways could they and we shrink from the daily cross and find our power elsewhere?

5. How does Paul insist that the Corinthians prepare for his coming (2 Cor. 13:5-6)?

6. Paul asks them to examine themselves not so much in their doctrine as in their experience. How could the Corinthians know experientially that they truly belonged to Christ?

7. In what ways does Paul's show that he cares more for *their* passing the test than for *his* seeming to pass the test in the eyes of others (2 Cor. 13:7-9)?

8. How is Paul's attitude one more example of the use of authority to build up rather than to tear down (2 Cor. 13:10)?

9. In what specific ways does Paul pray they will be built up (2 Cor. 13:11-14)?

10. If you are unsure of your position in Christ, what can you do about it in light of this chapter (2 Cor. 13)?

Session #12 March 27- April 1 Viewing this Unfinished Motion Picture

Review of 2 Corinthians 1-13 Please answer the questions based on the entire chapter.

The Introduction noted that 2 Corinthians gives us the inside view of a first-century Christian-the apostle Paul. But this is no snapshot, no still-picture, but rather a motion picture of a person in process. Second Corinthians was written at more than one sitting, as Paul responded to fresh pressures and problems. We see him (and the Corinthians) at his worst, with his feelings bent out of shape, not frozen into a verbal portrait but rather expressed dynamically, sometimes hanging out awkwardly. This exquisite transparency is the genius of the apostle. It is also the genius of this lovely letter and of the faith Paul longs for his dear Corinthians-and us-to wholeheartedly embrace. A short review will firm up its abiding value to us in exploring what the Christian life is like *on the inside*.

1. What do you find hardest to hear from a highly respected person when he (or she) reveals his inmost thoughts?

2. Now that you have completed studying the letter, what new insights do you have into the *comfort of God* experienced by the Christian (2 Cor. 1:1-11)?

3. As followers of Jesus, how can we hear God's affirmation, his "yes" in the realities of our daily life (2 Cor. 1:12-2:17)?

4. How have you been encouraged to become more bold through discovering that you are a letter from Christ, a person who reflects God's glory to those around you (2 Cor. 3:1-18)?

5. How has knowing that we have "this treasure in jars of clay" affected your view of ministry (2 Cor. 4:1-5:10)?

6. What kind of ambassador for Christ will commend the Christian faith to the world (2 Cor. 5:11-6:13)?

7. What have you learned about experiencing godly sorrow, rather than worldly sorrow (2 Cor. 6:14-7:16)?

8. Paul says that God loves a hilarious giver (2 Cor. 9:7). What have you learned about the sources of Christian generosity (2 Cor. 8:1-9:15)?

9. Christians can be tough and tender at the same time. How do you think it is possible to tear down strongholds and to build people up at the same time (2 Cor. 10:1-18)?

10. What stereotypes or caricatures of spiritual leaders have been challenged by this letter (2 Cor. 11:1-33)?

11. Paul's great watchword is, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). When have you seen God's power displayed in the midst of your weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:1-21)?

12. According to Paul, what is God looking for in the life of a follower of Jesus (2 Cor. 13:1-14)?

13. How has this letter added to your understanding of what it means to live by faith?

Bible Study will begin again the week after Easter April 10 – 15 as we study the book of Daniel.