

For The Good of the Church

2Corinthians 12:11-21

Many people, even many who only know a little bit about the bible, are familiar with what the Bible tells us about the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis.

Joseph was the second youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob.

Before his younger brother Benjamin was born, the bible says that Jacob “loved Joseph more than any other of his sons because he was the son of his old age.”

He was the favourite and his dad had no problem putting that on display by giving him a special “robe of many colours.”

Are there any older siblings with us in church this morning?

I’m going to make a wild guess here and say that there are at least some of you who think that your younger brothers or sisters get special treatment.

I am also guessing you don’t like it very much.

Imagine that feeling times a thousand!

For Joseph’s brothers it was more than a feeling of Joseph being the favourite, their dad made it very plain that he was the favourite.

Naturally his brothers did not like Joseph very much.

Add to that the dreams Joseph had as a young man. Dreams that suggested that one day in the future all his brothers and even his parents would bow down to him indicating that he would rule over them.

They grew to despise him so much that they came up with a plan to kill him, but instead, in order to make a few dollars, they ended up selling him into slavery instead which is how Joseph ends up in Egypt.

Many years go by and Joseph goes through a few ups and downs and at one point ends up in prison where his ability to interpret dreams gets him out of jail and puts him in charge of everything in Egypt so he can use his skill of administration to store up a huge amount of food to survive a severe famine that was coming.

Once the famine hits, Joseph’s family hears that there is food in Egypt and his brothers come looking to buy some.

Since it had been so many years and Joseph was dressed like an Egyptian they don’t recognize him, but he recognizes them.

Can you imagine the emotions that he must have been feeling?

Here his dreams about being a ruler from so many years ago had come true and standing before him were his brothers who had hated him and betrayed him.

How easy would it have been to take his revenge in that moment?

Instead, after putting them through a bit of testing he reveals himself and he invites them to come to Egypt where he promises to provide for their needs.

Instead of bringing them harm, he looks out for the good of his brothers.

Near the end of the book of Genesis after Jacob had passed away his brothers are worried that he will finally take his revenge and he puts them at ease saying, “*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*”

Even though they had their problems in the past, Joseph was willing to seek their good.

[That is somewhat similar to the situation between Paul and the church at Corinth. They had gone through some difficult times in their relationship and the church had acted in some hurtful ways towards the apostle, but even so Paul was committed to acting for the good of the church. That is what we see in our text this morning **2 Corinthians 12:11-21**. This, I believe, is something the LORD calls every single believer towards. We are called to love and serve His people, but you know that is hard at times and so Paul’s example here is a real gift to us and the lessons God has in these verses are really important. I believe the LORD has at least four lessons for us here about caring for the good of the church. Lesson one is this...]

Point #1 – God exercises His power for the good of the church. (Verses 11-13)

While there is no end to people who try to cast doubt on those approved by God, the Lord clearly acts to make known the gospel through His chosen servants.

As we come to verse 11, the apostle is bringing to a close the section of the letter where he has engaged in the foolishness of boasting in order to teach the Corinthians about the foolishness of boasting. (Verse 11a stop at “commended by you.”)

When he says here that they ‘forced’ him into being a fool, what he probably means is that given the situation he could see no other effective way to get his point across.

They had let people into the church who were very full of themselves and painted themselves as better than the apostle and a good number of people in the church went along with it.

Paul is right to think it should have been different. The Corinthians should have come to Paul’s defense.

Why? He tells us in **verse 11b-12**.

It is so important to see Paul say of himself here that he is “nothing.”

When he is comparing himself to these so-called “super-apostles” who are causing so much harm in the church, he is not trying to make the case that he should be trusted because of who he is in and of himself.

On his own he is nothing. He is an apostle by the grace of God and his apostleship is demonstrated by the power of God.

It says here that the signs of his apostleship “were performed...with utmost patience.”

Another way to say that would be unwavering endurance which indicates that they happened consistently and for an extended period of time.

We know Paul was in Corinth for eighteen months on his first trip there and we know that he went there for a period of ministry on at least one other occasion.

During that time the apostle performs “signs, wonders, and mighty works”, things that are beyond the human capacity to do.

The Corinthians watched the healing of the sick, heard the wisdom of the Spirit, and witnessed the power of the devil overcome in staggering ways.

While the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to all the people of God, He did so in a unique and particularly powerful way in the apostles so as to affirm their calling to lay the theological foundation of the church.

It says here in verse thirteen that the Corinthians experienced as much of this genuine apostolic ministry as any of church, except Paul received no financial support from them.

His point being that their experience of Paul’s ministry in the power of God should have made them quick to defend him against the fake apostles.

Yet despite all the clarity the Corinthian believers were taken in by these people big on talk and short on power.

It is staggering to me how much the LORD can do for the good of His people and how easily people can forget about it.

[It reminds me of Moses and the people of Israel. Think of how much those people saw of the power of God to deliver them from slavery in Egypt! They walked through the sea with a towering wall of water on their left and right. They walked through on dry ground and yet as soon as they come to a place where the water is undrinkable the bible says they, “grumbled against Moses”. God miraculously makes the water drinkable. A short time after that they run short on food and the bible says the people “grumbled against Moses” and said, “It would have been better to die in Egypt.”]

How many times has the LORD acted in power for the good of His people and His people forget?

Listen, He has left no doubt about this book!

He has left no doubt about whether or not we can trust the witness of the apostles of Christ!

[Almighty God has acted in power for the good of His people. Christians may doubt, but the Christian faith itself has never been in doubt. God has laid the foundation for the church in the apostles and prophets and if we are lead astray it is only because of the hardness of our own hearts rather than any lack of the LORD acting for the good of His people. Here is a second lesson from this text, that...]

Point #2 – Striving for the good of the church is costly. (Verses 14-15)

If one is to serve the church he or she must be willing to sacrifice, bear insults, endure weariness, and expend resources.

Paul's request for the Corinthians to 'forgive' him the 'wrong' of not being a burden to them during his visits is almost certainly intended as sarcasm.

"I'm sorry I've done such a terrible thing by not taking advantage of you in any way."

It is like he is just astounded that they are blind to his desire to serve them for their good.

Refusing to validate their worldly thinking on position and power, he doubles down on a Christ like attitude of service in **verse 14**.

I think it is precisely because they are upside down in their thinking about power and position that he resolves to keep serving them without taking anything to meet his personal needs.

This was not his practice in every church but it is here because he has no interest in their stuff, but his interest is their wellbeing.

He likens it to a parent/child relationship.

He sees himself as their spiritual father and he sees them like little children in the faith.

When children are small it is up to the parents to provide everything for them and that often takes sacrifice.

Parents who truly love their children see it as an outpouring of their love to give of themselves for the good of their children.

That is how Paul is seeing his service to the church (**Verse 15**).

He is most happy to spend his resources for the good of the Corinthian believers and he is most happy to spend his strength and energy for their 'souls' which I understand to mean their eternal good.

That is no easy task especially when you consider that at least some of these believers are looking down on him for such efforts.

He is loving them with tremendous affection and they are growing less affectionate as a result.

Even in the best of circumstances seeking the good of other believers can be taxing, it is hard to imagine the challenge of pouring yourself out for people who are despising your efforts, but that can be the cost of seeking the good of the church.

[Have you ever heard a story of people who start out in very poor and dangerous circumstances who make it through school, get a job and make a better life for themselves? Do you know what one of the most common themes of stories like that is? A parent or grandparent working two or three jobs and being relentless in raising their children to be productive and responsible. That is hard and costly so why do people pour themselves out like that? For the good of their children.]

That is how Paul is picturing his service to the church.

It has been working day and night pouring his life out for their good.

While we would not say our service for the good of God's people can compare with the efforts of the apostle, some of you have done enough to know it is costly.

I think of people who have faithfully served behind the scenes for years.

Sunday school teachers, people who make meals, elders, deacons, people who spend countless hours in prayer, people who meet the needs of others in many different ways, and the list could go on.

Some of you have been criticized and mistreated because of your service.

That is hard. It is hard to pour your life out, but if we want to work for the good of God's people it comes at a cost.

[There is more though here than just sacrifice. It is possible to pour our lives into godless things. People do that all the time. It is possible to be a hard worker and have that do more harm than good. We need more than a willingness to sacrifice and the next two lessons show us that clearly. In addition to self-sacrifice we need to know that...]

Point #3 – Caring about the church means caring about the truth. (Verses 16-19)

As believers our chief concern in life should always be God's assessment of every situation because His judgement is always objectively true and we should want everyone in the church to both know and agree with that evaluation.

One of the things that the so called super apostles had tried to do is stir up accusations against Paul.

They tried to raise doubts in the mind of the Corinthians about Paul's love for them and they also tried to raise doubts about his integrity.

Rather than let the charges go unanswered, he makes an effort to set the record straight.

Now, there is a danger for us here.

When we are seeking to defend ourselves it is very easy to focus on ourselves, which can blind us to actual failings in our lives.

Paul's goal here is something very different than defending his image or reputation.

First, let's look at the lie that he is trying to combat and then we will see what he does with it.

The lie people were telling about him is that all his selfless work and not being a burden to them was really a scam. Listen to verses 16-18.

They were claiming that Paul didn't ask them for any support while he was with them so that he could send some people in after he left to soak them for even more money.

Their accusation was likely focused on the money being raised for the poor in Jerusalem.

That the money wasn't going to Jerusalem, but it was going to line Paul's pockets.

To combat the lie, he tells them to consider the conduct of those he sent to Corinth.

He names Titus and another brother.

He says, think about how they lived among you and how we lived among you! It was the same.

This is no scam. If it were a scam Paul and his fellow servants would have taken the cash and left town never to be heard from again.

The truth is their service and sacrifice came from genuine affection and a genuine desire for their good.

Why set the record straight? Why defend himself like this? He tells us in verse 19.

His defense of himself and his co-workers has nothing to do with self-vindication.

He could have just kicked the dust of Corinth off his sandals and been content that the LORD knows the truth and carried on with life.

Instead, because he cares about the good of these believers, he is unwilling to leave them to themselves believing a lie.

He wants them to know the truth because he wants them to be encouraged and built up in the truth of Christ.

It is impossible to care about the church without caring about the truth.

[Some of you will remember a few years ago a few of us travelled to Togo West Africa to help build a Hospital with ABWE. One of things that amazed me was the missionaries telling us about how often people were lied to in the Togolese medical system. If someone was seriously ill with something like cancer they might be told that they only had a cold and would be fine. Part of their culture was to lie about really bad news. In doing that though they made it impossible to care for the patient.]

It is the same way in the church.

If we could care less about truth then we could care less about the good of the church.

This has nothing to do with defending ourselves or justifying ourselves, this is about what is true in the sight of Christ for the good of God's people.

This is something that is very easy to let go of for the sake of avoiding difficult things.

[It is easy to ignore things or sweep things under the rug as the old saying goes, but that does no one any lasting good in fact it is far more likely to lead someone to their eternal destruction. Far better to bring things into the light. Be willing to stand for the truth in the sight of God and before the people of God so that we can build each other up in Christ. That brings us to one more lesson which is closely related to caring about truth. The lesson is that...]

Point #4 – Desiring righteousness is necessary for the good of the church. (Verses 20-21)

If the church is to flourish it needs more than people to sit in a pew and offer lip service to Jesus, it needs the radical transformation of the hearts of people so that we turn away from what God hates and towards what God loves.

Having explained that his defense is about speaking the truth in 'the sight of God' for the sake of building up these believers in Christ, he offers his reason for taking up such a big part of this letter to prove his case to them.

Verse 20 starts with the word 'for'. This is the reason why he has stayed on this point. He writes, (**Verse 20a** stopping at 'not as you wish').

He is fearful of what he is going to find when he visits the church.

He is afraid that they will not be walking with the LORD as they should be, and that they will be disappointed in him because they have bought into the lies about how an apostle should act towards the church.

He goes on in the rest of **verse 20** to describe what he is fearful of finding in the church when he arrives.

These are all things that the Corinthians had struggled with in the past and they are all things that are common to the human condition.

According to the Bible people are NOT good.

It is true that most people think of themselves as good, but that is only because people who operate according to their own wisdom measure themselves by their own standards instead of measuring themselves according to God's standards.

We are not good by nature. We are self centered which leads us to do the things mentioned here in verse 20.

When Almighty God does a saving work in us we are changed into something new.

We recognize that Jesus died for us to make us right with God and we trust in Him as our Saviour.

The work of God the Holy Spirit in addition to giving us hearts to believe this good news about Christ also gives us hearts that want to fight against our natural desire for self-centeredness and fight to desire the things that God says are right and good.

That is what we call righteousness.

Paul is fearful here that when he comes to Corinth the people in the church are going to be acting more like unbelievers than believers.

Do you know what that does? It kills the witness of the gospel in the world.

It causes people to think that the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit doesn't make a difference in the lives of people who name the name of Jesus.

He expands on his fear a bit more in **verse 21**.

It seems to make the most sense to understand his concern about being humbled here as being related to the confidence he expressed in their repentance back in chapter seven.

He had received word that they had experienced godly sorrow and that they had taken steps to deal with those in the church who were living like they could care less about God's moral standards.

That gave him great confidence that his efforts had made a difference, but what if they had gone backwards in the meantime.

It could have been weeks or even months between the time he received encouraging news about them and his sending of this letter and even longer until he makes it there in person.

What if his opponents had gained more ground and pulled the people farther away from the truth that Paul had established among them?

What if they were persisting in the sins that Paul had warned them against?
 He would be both humbled and heartbroken because they would be living like unbelievers and his confidence about their salvation would rightly be shaken.

Not only that but they would be doing things that would be harming themselves and everyone around them as well.

It is impossible for him to care about their good and be ok with that.

[Just imagine for a moment that a child came home with a bag of what looked like candy. He shows the bag to his mom and his mom looks at the label and sees that what looks like candy to the child is really rat poison. What is his mom going to do? She is going to say to her son that he cannot eat it because it is bad for him. Now she will do more than take away what is going to hurt him, she will also feed him what good for him as well.]

It is impossible to care about the good of the church and not care about what God says about what is right and wrong.

We may deceive ourselves in all kinds of ways to talk ourselves out of the responsibility to encourage one another away from the things that God hates and towards the things that God loves, but when we do that we are doing nothing good for our fellow believers.

If we care about the good of the church we will have a genuine desire for righteousness.

That bring me to the question I want to end on this morning. The question is, "Do we care about the good of the Church?"

God does! He has and will exercise His glorious power for the good of the church.

If God cares we should too even though it will be costly to do so.

If we care about the church then we need to care about the truth.

If we care about the church then we need to desire what is right in the sight of God.

Do we care about the good of the church?

If we have any love for Jesus, then we must care for the church that He loves.

This is more than a gathering of a group of people for some kind of social benefit.

This is a gathering of people for whom Jesus died so that we would belong to the LORD forever to the eternal praise of His glorious grace.

If we have any love for Christ then we must also love His people and that means caring deeply for the good of the church.