

Anguish For Prodigals

2 Corinthians 12:11-13:14

We are closing out our series on the book of 2 Corinthians this morning. We've spent several months working our way through it and learned many things about God, Paul, and the church of Corinth that we've been able to apply to our lives. As we study the remaining passages, I want you to think about people in your life, loved ones, who may be wayward or wandering away from the faith. It can be really painful to think about because it might be a best friend or a family member. It might be a spouse or one of your children or grandchildren. We often think of people who drift away as prodigals because of the story of the prodigal son. They are turning away from all the blessings of God to go their own way for a time and it can cause us a lot of anguish.

Paul is going to end this letter in a very personal and emotional way because he's dealing with a church that is near and dear to his heart, but they are straying – straying from him, straying from Christ, and straying from the gospel and only way of salvation. Paul is in anguish because of his deep love for this church and as we read what he writes we will be able to relate because of the prodigals in our lives.

What I'd like to do is to work our way through these verses, connect with what Paul is thinking and feeling, and then spend some time in prayer for the prodigals in our lives – lift them up to the Lord once again in faith, trusting that he is good, wise and powerful and that he cares and can bring them to their senses in his own way and timing.

Paul has just finished boasting about his qualifications as an apostle – something he did reluctantly because he felt like he had to in order to wake the Corinthians up from their delusion. They had fallen for the schemes of the false teachers who were boasting about themselves in order to impress them. They were turning from Paul, turning from Christ, and turning from the true gospel, and it caused a lot of anguish for Paul.

So now he wraps up his boasting and makes an appeal for them to come to their senses before he arrives so he doesn't have to exercise his apostolic authority.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:11-13.

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. ¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

Paul points out that the reason he resorted to foolish boasting was because they so readily tossed aside all the true signs of apostleship they saw in him during his initial 18 months with them when he preached the gospel with accompanying signs and wonders. They should have been commending him, but he was forced to commend himself, because as soon as some charismatic false teachers came and started boasting about themselves and the importance of their mission, the Corinthians forgot all about Paul and what happened. That's common, when people drift away, they forget about all the blessings of the Lord.

They had experienced all the spiritual blessings that the rest of the churches experienced – the only thing lacking was that Paul refused to accept payment from them when he was with them – something he did out of love in order to not be a burden to them. We'll see in the next paragraph that this act of love was being twisted by the false apostles to make it look like he was being devious – as if he was refusing payment to win their loyalty so that they would give more generously in the offering for the poor in Judea, and then Paul would take a big cut for himself. So Paul sarcastically calls them to forgive him for wronging them by not receiving payment from them.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:14-18.

¹⁴ Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? ¹⁶ But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. ¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take

advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

So Paul tells them he's still not going to take payment from them when he arrives for his next visit. He doesn't want their money; he only wants them! He wants them to turn back to the truth. As their spiritual father he points out that it's not the place for children to support their parents, but for parents to support their children. Therefore, he will gladly spend or be spent for their souls.

He then asks: If I love you more, am I to be loved less? And here is where we see that the false teachers were twisting his act of love to make it look like he was being crafty and deceiving them. That's common for people who are drifting away – they readily accept lies to justify their turning away. Paul simply asks: Did I or anyone I sent to you ever take advantage of you in any way, or do anything different when it came to financial support? In other words, is there any evidence whatsoever that these accusations are true? The obvious answer is: Absolutely not!

Read 2 Corinthians 12:19-21.

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. ²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. ²¹ I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

So, yet another accusation that was brought against Paul was that in his explanations to them over the past year of his various actions – probably in response to other false accusations – he was just trying to save face and defend himself. Paul says that's not at all what he was doing. His explanations were for their sake, so they would be built up. He was trying to bring clarity so they wouldn't get hung up on faulty assumptions, and could

move forward in their spiritual growth, but they were thinking he was just defending himself.

So at this point, he was getting concerned about what he would find when he got back to them. He was concerned that he would find a lack of true repentance. I think this goes back to his writing of the book of 1 Corinthians and what happened after that. In that letter and in subsequent interactions, he had given them correction and instruction and called them to repentance in several issues including what he listed: “quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” There was also “impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality.” He addressed all these things in 1 Corinthians and in other interactions he had with them in person or through one of his associates. The Corinthians showed signs of repentance upon receiving correction and Titus had brought a very promising report.

But after hearing the latest report, which led to the writing of these things, he was getting concerned that true repentance wasn't really happening, and that when he got there he'd find all the same sins going on as before, and then he would have to assert his apostolic authority in a powerful way, which they wouldn't like. He was afraid that he would be humiliated by what he found and filled with grief over their lack of true repentance.

So he's filled with uncertainty at this point, anguish, and fear. What would happen to this church that he loved so deeply and had poured so much of his life into? Maybe you've felt that way about a loved one you've invested in who's begun to stray. And perhaps this gives us a little insight into God's heart and what he goes through when we drift away from him... I don't want to say that God is just like us, because he's not, but we do see his anguish throughout the OT as his people strayed. And the father in the prodigal son story is meant to represent God – a father who struggled and longed for his son to return.

So now we get to chapter 13, and once again he is trying to prepare them for his next visit. We saw something like this earlier in this book, only there the circumstances were much different. He was excited to see them at that point because Titus had told him of their repentance and renewed affection for him.

But now everything had changed and gone in the opposite direction. So these preparations are much more serious.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:1-4.

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them— ³since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

So he knows that when he shows up, he's going to have to deal with the false teachers and anyone who had been led astray by them and didn't repent. And he's not going to show the same patience and mercy he did on his last visit, when he gave them time and space to repent. This time they've had plenty of time to repent and he's going to cleanse the church by asserting his apostolic authority in the power of Christ.

But he wouldn't come in a blind rage and fly off the handle. Discipline would be handled according to God's righteous standard, thus, charges would have to be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. But Paul wanted to be clear that those who did not repent, would be removed from the church. The power of Christ would be present. And they had seen the power of Christ when Paul was there before establishing the church. Signs and wonders had been performed among them. And it would be with that same power that Paul would come, this time to purify the church.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:5-10.

⁵Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. ⁷But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong.

Your restoration is what we pray for. ¹⁰ For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

So in the time before he got there he urges them to test themselves to see if they are in the faith. That little phrase “the faith” means the gospel that Paul had preached to them. Those teachings of Christianity were “the faith.” (cf. Jude 1:3) So they were to test themselves by the true gospel to see if they were in it – if they were believing it and faithful to it. Were they trusting in Jesus Christ and his life, death, and resurrection to save them?

The redemption of Jesus Christ would have been the core truth that the false apostles, who were likely Jewish, were denying and trying to turn people away from. So Paul calls them back to the gospel as the dividing line between those who were true and false. If they were true, Christ would be in them; if they were false he would not, and they would fail to meet the test. I think this is the same test and dividing line Paul would use when he came to them to purify the church.

He also mentions that he hoped they would also find out that he and his team had not failed the test. The wording is confusing, but I think he’s basically saying that in addition to them testing themselves, he also hopes that they would see that Paul and his team are in the faith. And then he clarifies (probably because of those trying to twist everything he says) that his primary desire was not to prove his legitimacy, but so they would do what is right and walk in the truth. That’s what he wanted most, even if they thought he failed the test because he *“cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”*

He further clarifies that what he wants most is their restoration. That’s why he’s writing these things and sending them ahead of his visit. His hope is they will repent and he won’t have to be severe in his authority because Christ gave him authority to build up, not tear down, so that was what he was wanting most.

Read 2 Corinthians 13:11-14.

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

So he ends with a list of parting instructions and a blessing. “Rejoice” seems out of place and other translations use the word “goodbye” or “farewell” and that seems to much more naturally fit the tone and context. They were to aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace, greet one another with a holy kiss... all of these seem very fitting for the situation.

You can see that Paul cared very deeply for this prodigal/wandering church. He said a lot of hard things and you can see his anguish in writing them, but that’s because he loves them deeply and desperately wants to see them turn back once again.

When you go through the anguish of watching someone drift away from the Lord, it’s so sad and frustrating. Oftentimes they give some reasons, maybe something they’ve heard from someone else who’s twisting the truth. They’re believing lies and taking things out of context to justify their behavior and make them look like they’re in the right. They’re letting themselves get hooked by a delusion rather than listening to the truth and it seems like it doesn’t matter what you say. They’ve turned a critical eye to the truth and look for anything they can find to put the blame on something else.

I’m guessing that Paul’s heart for the Corinthians is something that many of us can relate to. I think it’s also a picture of God’s heart for those who are straying from him. He knows what we’re going through, he hears our prayers, and he cares very much.

So now we’re going to go into a time of praying for those we love who may be on the fence or wandering away. You can pray on your own or with others during this time. I’m planning to give us 5 minutes for prayer and I’ll close at the end. (5 minute timer on screen)