

Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008

SHARED LIVES

The relationship between a pastor and his people

February 13, 2008 – 2nd Corinthians 2:12-3:6

Shared Lives: The Inextricably entwined lives of pastor and congregation

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On the way home from visiting my in-laws over Christmas, our family stopped in Springfield, Illinois, to spend the day at the Abraham Lincoln home, Presidential Library, and Museum. It was one of the best historical experiences our family has had (and since my husband is a history teacher, we have a lot of those!) One particular part of the museum fascinated me. It was the “Hall of Whispers.” This hall was long and labyrinthine, and its walls were covered, floor to ceiling, with political cartoons, personal letters, and editorials, all making fun of President Lincoln. And as you walked down the corridor, you heard nasty voices through the speakers, whispering criticisms of the President. Everything was a target, from his policies and decisions, to his cabinet appointments, his appearance, and his wife’s wardrobe. I knew Lincoln had been President during one of the most difficult periods in our nation’s history, but I was surprised at the sheer volume and viciousness of the attacks on him from people on all sides of the political arena. Modern politics are no more negative or mean-spirited than they were in the 1860s, I assure you.

I’ve also been listening to Jeff Schaara’s book on tape, The Glorious Cause, about America’s War for Independence. I’m just past the battles of Brandywine and Germantown and have been surprised at how seriously George Washington feared that Congress would replace him for what they perceived to be poor leadership! Things had not been going well, and people had begun to doubt Washington’s ability to make decisions.

We have the benefit of hindsight with both President Lincoln and General Washington, and on Monday we’ll celebrate the holiday that honors both of them. From our position in history it’s easy for us to forget that not everyone agreed with these men; in fact, many thought they were doing exactly the wrong thing. They both had many vocal enemies. So over the past few months of thinking about history, I’ve been impressed with the truth that anyone in a position of leadership who dares to do a hard thing will be criticized.

And then we come to Paul and our study in II Corinthians. And I see some parallels. Paul ministered during a difficult time in church history. He was often misunderstood, and he had many vocal critics, too. But before we go on, let’s read today’s text in its entirety. Turn in your Bibles to II Corinthians 2. We’ll start in verse 12 and read through chapter 3, verse 6. I’m reading from the NASB.

Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of

Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Let's review. Paul initially spent 18 months in Corinth establishing the church there. Corinth was an exceedingly wicked city, and the new church proved vulnerable to some of the immorality that pressed in on them from the culture, as well as false teachers--men who challenged Paul's authority and ministry. Paul writes I Corinthians to address these problems, but the problems persist. Paul makes a visit to the church, but it doesn't go well. Scholars call this the "painful visit" (2:1). Paul follows the "painful visit" with a "severe letter," which has been lost to us. This "severe letter" was delivered by Titus. In our passage today Paul describes his state of mind as he waits to hear from Titus how the Corinthian church reacted to his "severe letter."

Though it's hard to superimpose an outline on a personal letter—and this is a deeply personal letter—I'm calling this section "**Heartache in ministry**," verses 12-13. Things are not going well for Paul. He has just left the church in Ephesus, where he was driven out by rioting. He is concerned about the Corinthian church plant and its moral and doctrinal failings. Remember that I Corinthians, Paul's first letter to this church, addresses some pretty heavy-duty issues-- issues of incest, divisions, marriage, singleness, divorce, abuses of the Lord's supper and abuses of spiritual gifts. And now they were rebelling against Paul's himself. Paul has been criticized and hurt. Paul had evidently made arrangements to meet Titus in Troas to find out if the "severe letter" had further alienated the church or healed his relationship with them.

Look at Troas on the map. You can see that it's right on the Aegean Sea. In fact, it was an important port, much like Ephesus. Earlier Paul had used this "open door" metaphor to describe Ephesus, and he ended up staying there for 2 whole years. In other words, there was a lot of potential ministry waiting in Troas, but Paul has "no rest" in his spirit and moves on to Macedonia, hoping to find Titus there. I'm sure he was concerned for Titus' safety as well as the state of the Corinthians. Our emphasis this week is how the lives of pastor and congregation are intertwined, and we see this here. Paul's main mission in life was to preach the gospel (Gal 1:11-16; II Tim 1:10), yet he feels can't pursue that mission in Troas because of his concern for this Corinthian congregation. I have seen this deep attachment in the lives of the pastors I know best—my father-in-law and my grandfather. I have seen that costly investment in people's lives forges a spiritual and emotional bond that can never be broken. It prompts selfless acts that defy

explanation, and can result in great satisfaction, but also great pain. There is indeed the potential for heartbreak in the pastoral ministry.

Part of the difficulty in studying a book like this is that we are not pastors. But I think we can gain insight into the challenges our pastors face. We also can apply some of these insights to our own areas of ministry and our experience with those we invest in—women we mentor, students we teach, and the children in our families.

Well, Paul *did* meet up with Titus in Macedonia. But Paul doesn't say so here. In fact, he doesn't mention that for 5 more chapters—not until 7:5. Flip over there in your Bibles: “For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more.” Not only does he find Titus, but he hears what he's hoping to hear—that the Corinthian church has repented. But that's getting ahead of ourselves.

Before Paul meets Titus he admits he is restless, afflicted, fearful, even depressed. Just as with Washington and Lincoln, we have 20/20 hindsight about Paul's ministry. We know him to be the first and greatest missionary and a fruitful pastor. But at that time, things didn't always look that way. He was a real person who dealt with other real people. He had some success and some failure. When he preached the gospel, some believed and some didn't. Some saw Christ in him, and some didn't. Some people liked him and some probably didn't! Some praised him and some criticized.

I wonder if we allow the missionaries we support to be as honest as Paul was? Rich and I have a lot of missionaries in our families, and we've both spent time doing cross-cultural missions work. There is a subtle but real pressure on many missionaries to report only the good news. We've heard missionaries say, “What will our supporters think if we tell them *this?!?*” As senders and supporters, I think we need to remember that faithfulness and diligence are the standards, not necessarily measurable results or feel-good stories. And I hope that the Kietzmans and the Gauthiers and the Kendalls and the Neumanns and the Krebses and the Jacobsons, and many other missionaries are on your prayer list and are household names to your children. They are facing many of the things Paul faced today; they're doing the hard work of missions right now.

Burt and Trish Koppendraye, for example, are missionaries to Guinea, West Africa, an impoverished and predominantly Muslim country. They minister to the Maninka, our church's adopted people group. We first heard of the Koppendrayes when we attended their sending church, Bethlehem Baptist, in Minneapolis. (In fact, we initially came to Autumn Ridge because of the Maninka team connection..) Burt and Trish have stuck it out in a spiritually dark country for many years. There were virtually no Maninka Christians when the team first went, and now there is a small group of believers. There was no Christian hospital, and now there will be. But it's been a long, slow process. We should be the kind of church that knows and loves our missionaries in such a way that they can share all the news with us, not just the good news.

Paul calls Titus his brother here. He wasn't his biological brother, but the Christian faith is such that believers have a bond that goes as deep as the bonds of family. Titus played an important role in the restoration of the Corinthian church. In fact, it seems Titus was Paul's "go-to guy" for other difficult situations. He was sent to the elders in Jerusalem as an example of a Gentile convert. He was sent to a difficult church in Crete to warn divisive people. When Paul was in prison he sent Titus to Dalmatia, another difficult church. When the situation looked bleak, Paul had a brother to help him. I grew up in a church where the men used this term all the time: "Good morning, brother" was the standard greeting. I saw a deep affection for one another in my childhood church. We truly were a family. And that's a biblical concept.

Paul doesn't dwell on the difficulties, though. Verse 14 starts in with praise and thanks to God. There are two **word pictures of ministry** we see here. The first is that of a Roman triumph: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ." When a Roman military leader won a major battle, he was sometimes voted a "Triumph," a grand procession through the city streets. Included in the procession would be the spoils of war and the captives, who were most likely being led to their death or to slavery. What's the analogy? Are Christians the victors along with Christ because of our identification with him through redemption? Or are we captives? Christ has conquered our rebellion against him and we have died to sin and self and are God's willing servants. Commentaries disagree; I'll leave it for you to decide. In any case, Christ is the victor. If you're in Christ, you're on the winning side. Ultimately, no matter how bleak our circumstances look, we can say with Paul, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ."

The second word picture is that of a fragrance—"the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." We are the "fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." This passage carries with it the idea of Lev. 23:18—the Old Testament offerings produced an aroma that was pleasing to God. And notice the text says we are the aroma of Christ TO God. We are only reconciled to God because of the work of Christ. Our lives can be acceptable to him only because of what Christ has done to reconcile us to the Father. There is no other way to God than Jesus Christ. But not only are we "TO God," but we are "among those being saved. It is always amazing to me when I stop to ponder this, that God would use humans in such a way. What a privilege to be the fragrance of Christ to the world. One childhood memory I have is of my dad and my brothers arriving home from basketball practice at supertime on cold winter evenings. They were always famished, and my mom is an excellent cook. They'd burst in the door, stop & sniff, and then shout out their guess: "Spaghetti!" or "Pork chops!" or whatever they thought they smelled. It became a kind of competition. Paul says the world spends time near us, smells the fragrance of our lives and says, "Christian!" But not everyone is drawn to the fragrance of Christ. Not all are "being saved." Some turn away and rebel. Some are "perishing." And that is why Paul goes on: "to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life" (14-16). When the Roman victory procession passed through the streets, there would be incense burning to the god Jupiter. The smell of this incense was the smell of victory to the Romans, but the smell of death to those sentenced to execution.

There is no middle ground here. Life or death. People hear the gospel, and those who are being saved are drawn to the truth. They recognize, by God's Spirit working in them, that

the gospel's message comes from the source of life ("from life") and it leads "to life." However, those who are perishing smell in the gospel the stench of death and bondage and it leads them "to death." This passage calls to mind Moses' words: "I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live" (Deut. 30:19) and Jesus' words: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). Peter states this theme using different imagery when he describes the gospel as either a corner stone or a stumbling stone. He says the gospel as cornerstone is precious to those who believe, but for those who don't believe, it's a "rock of offense" and a stumbling stone, "for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed" (I Peter 2:6-8). This is serious business, and Paul knows it. Every time the gospel is presented, people are moving either closer to life or closer to death. So what is Paul's response to stakes that are that high? Verse 16: "And who is adequate for these things?" The implied answer is, "No one!"

A passage like this should make us diligent to pray for our pastors. Gospel proclamation is a huge privilege and a huge responsibility. Pastors need spiritual protection against discouragement, burnout, exhaustion, and moral temptation. A pastor has to be ready to preach every Sunday, no matter what crisis may have come up in the church family over the week—funerals, hospital visits, prison visits, emergency counseling sessions, and the list goes on. In our family we try to remember to devote Saturday evening prayers to this. We pray by name for the Pastors we know who will be preaching the next day—Pastor Steer, Rich's dad, and other pastors who are dear to us. We pray for power, for courage to speak the truth, and for anointing of the Holy Spirit, and we pray for the persecuted church around the world—those pastors who risk their lives by their preaching. There is warfare going on whenever God's word is proclaimed, and through some mysterious way, God allows us to be a part of the battle when we pray.

In this next section, we see the **marks of effective ministry**. Paul sets up the contrast between his own ministry and that of the troublemakers in the Corinthian church. First, effective ministry isn't motivated by money. Look at verse 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." The word "peddle" here in the Greek carries with it the idea of a huckster or con artist--someone who sells a cheap imitation of the real thing to make a quick buck. I remember having to be careful of peddlers like this in the Asian street markets. If you were careful, you could get some phenomenal deals on really good US brands that are made in Asia. But often the supposed good deal was just a fake. Some fakes were obvious--like the baseball caps that said, "New York Bulls" or "Cincinnati Yankees." But some things didn't prove their quality until you actually tried to use it. I recall an "Adidas" duffle bag we bought in Beijing that fell apart before we got it to the airport . . . that same day!

Apparently these false teachers in Corinth were like that—fakes who sold a false gospel. Some of them were Judaizers, or men who taught that salvation came through the combination of Christ's death and following the Old Testament Jewish law. These teachers were also motivated more by their own greed than a passion for the truth. Paul didn't think it was wrong for pastors to be paid (see I Cor. 9:3-10), but he chose to forfeit that right himself, supporting himself by

making tents. Do you see evidence that there are still ministers who “peddle the word of God for profit” today? We need to be wary of TV evangelists and authors that proclaim the health and wealth gospel—people who claim that God wants everyone to be rich or that you’ll be healed if you have enough faith . . . and send cash. And I imagine that there is a temptation, even for orthodox evangelicals to water down the gospel in a quest for sheer bigness. But Paul was not motivated by money; rather he spoke “before God with sincerity.” Surely the realization that one speaks “before God” first and foremost is the antidote to a counterfeit gospel.

So sincerity, not greed, is one thing that set Paul’s ministry apart from that of the Corinthian trouble-makers. Another mark of Paul’s ministry is that it resulted in changed lives. But let me give you some background. At this time it was customary to gain access to a church for a speaking opportunity by presenting a letter of introduction from someone the congregation already knew and trusted. Some in the Corinthian church were apparently attacking Paul’s credentials. Perhaps it went something like this: “Paul can’t be a real apostle. The twelve that were with Christ for 3 whole years were the real ones. Paul was never even a part of that. How do you know he’s not just a pretender? He’s just a fly-by-night tentmaker! Have you ever seen a letter of recommendation from him? I’ll bet he can’t get one!”

Paul’s in a difficult spot defending himself on this one, because if we read between the lines, we can guess that one of the accusations against Paul was pride or self-commendation. Look at 3:1: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?” Don’t want to do that! Next sentence--“Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?” But how does he deny that he needs a letter of commendation without sounding prideful? How does he state his qualifications without commending himself? It really seems a little ridiculous for Paul to have to produce a letter of recommendation for the church that he himself started. If I were Paul, I’d feel annoyed.

This is Paul’s answer: “You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.” The measure of Paul’s ministry among them was that God had changed their hearts. And this is the best part of pastoral ministry or missions. Changed lives. The “tablets of stone” refers to the law--the 10 commandments that were literally carved on stone. And what Paul says echoes Ezekiel 36:26-27: “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes . . .”

Jeremiah 31:33 sounds similar: “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Remember chapter 1? All God’s promises are “yes” in Christ. While people have never been saved by keeping the law but always by grace through faith, the New Testament reveals the fulfillment of the gospel in Christ, and this is what Paul is talking about when he compares tablets of stone to tablets of human hearts. The ministry of the Spirit is superior to the Mosaic law. Paul says, “This day has come! This is the gospel. And it has happened in you.” This

declaration is particularly important in this situation, because remember some of these troublemakers in the Corinthian church were probably Judaizers--those who wanted to require adherence to the law for salvation. Down in verse 6 Paul quotes what must have been a well-known adage of the day, "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." The letter refers to the Old Testament law. It kills by making us aware of our sin, which brings death. But the new covenant of grace brings life. Paul goes on to contrast the old and new covenants, and we'll get into that more next week. He also contrasts the letter and the spirit extensively in Romans. (Romans 2:29; 3:19-20; 6:23; 7:6).

The last mark of effective ministry I see in this passage is that the power source is supernatural, not human. Look at verse 4: "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate." Remember his question back in verse 16? "Who is adequate for these things?" Here's the answer. An effective minister's adequacy comes from God through Christ. At various places in Paul's writings we can deduce the things that his opponents bragged about. In I Cor. 2:1, we see they bragged of their wisdom; in II Cor. 11:6, they bragged of their eloquence; in I Cor. 11:12 they bragged of their Jewish ancestry. But Paul boasts of Christ.

There's truth here about ourselves and there's truth about God. The truth about ourselves is humbling; it combats pride. The truth about God is encouraging, and it combats discouragement and fear. The truth about ourselves is that we bring nothing to the table. The verb here literally refers to thought--we don't even bring worthy thoughts to the ministry. When we're tempted to take credit for successes, we should remember this.

On the other hand, the truth about God is encouraging. Everything we need for ministry comes from him. He has the resources, and he loves to give them to us. What if my kids came down to breakfast on the first day of school and said, "Dad, we know you want us to go to school; we know you even require us to go to school. But we just don't think we can get there. I mean, it's too far to walk, and even if you took us, what if something terrible would happen? And what if we ran out of school supplies? I mean, what should I do if my pencil breaks? How could you get me a new one? We've been up all night worrying about this and we just don't feel confident that you can take care of this." You would think my kids were foolish or you'd think my husband is severely limited in his resources. Well, God is not limited in his resources, so that means we are being foolish when we doubt that he can make us adequate for ministry.

I received this book [The Valley of Vision](#) from my husband for Valentine's Day several years ago, and it's one of my favorite gifts. It's a collection of Puritan prayers. I want to close with one of them called "A Minister's Strength.

Unchangeable Jehovah,
When I am discouraged in my ministry
And full of doubts of my self,
Fasten me upon the rock of thy eternal election,
Then my hands will not hang down,
And I shall have hope for myself and others.

Thou dost know thy people by name,
 And wilt at the appointed season
 Lead them out of a natural to a gracious state
 By thy effectual calling.
This is the ground of my salvation,
 The object of my desire,
 The motive of my ministry.
Keep me from high thoughts of myself or my work,
 For I am nothing but sin and weakness;
 In me no good dwells,
 And my best works are but sin.
Humble me to the dust before thee.
Root and tear out the poisonous weed of self-righteousness,
 And show me my utter nothingness;
Keep me sensible of my sinnership;
Sink me deeper into penitence and self-abhorrence;
Break the Dagon of pride in pieces before the ark of thy presence;
Demolish the Babel of self-opinion, and scatter it to the wind;
Level to the ground my Jericho walls of a rebel heart;
Then grace, grace, will be my experience and cry.
I am a poor, feeble creature when faith is not in exercise,
 Like an eagle with pinioned wings;
Grant me to rest on thy power and faithfulness,
 And to know that there are two things worth living for:
 To further thy cause in the world,
 And to do good to the souls and bodies of men;
This is my ministry, my life, my prayer, my end.
Grant me grace that I shall not fail.

WBS Questions for Shared Lives – February 13, 2008

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the main points you've seen in II Corinthians so far? How is God speaking to you through this study, and how has the Holy Spirit helped you to apply what you've been learning?
2. Look at 2:12-13. If this has ever happened to you, tell your group about a time when a door seemed open to you, yet God was prompting you to do something else because you had "no rest for your spirit."
3. Read 3:4-5. Can you think of other Scriptures that state the same principle? How does this truth affect how you respond to challenges in your life?

Intensive Study Questions:

1. Review

- a. Who wrote this letter? To whom? For what purpose? What were some of the characteristics of Corinth and the Corinthian church?
- b. What are some of the broad themes we've seen in this book so far? Write a sentence or two summarizing each week's study.

1:1-11

1:12-24

2:1-11

2. Read II Corinthians 2:12-3:6. Consult a map of Paul's journeys. Locate Troas, Corinth, and Macedonia. Why did Paul leave Troas? Where did he go from there? Why? Can you recall any other incident that took place in Troas? (Hint: Acts 20 records one.)
3. Read verses 15-16 again. Explain the "aroma" metaphor. List at least 3 more Scriptural descriptions of the relationship between believers and unbelievers.
4. What role did Titus play in the situation with the Corinthian church? (2:13; 7:6, 13-14; 8:6, 16-17, 23; 12:18) Why was he so valuable to Paul?
5. Compare 3:2-3 with Ezekiel 36:26-27 and Jeremiah 31:33. What is meant by "tablets of stone" and "tablets of human hearts"?
6. Read what Paul says about the law in 3:6—"the letter." How does what he says about the law in Romans further explain his statement here? Look in Romans 2:29; 3:19-20; 6:23; 7:6.