

Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008

SHARED LIVES

Shared Purpose: God will prevail in our lives & our churches

April 30, 2008 – 2nd Corinthians 12:11-13:14

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Remember a couple of Mondays ago when we had what felt like the first true day of spring? The sun was out. The air was warm. It was John's day off. And we spent the entire day indoors shopping for a new mattress. We figured that it was time; we have had three mattresses in our married life and we're beginning the fourth decade. Now you need to understand that John and I do not shop together like many married couples. In the past I'd come home and say, "I found us a house," and he'd say "Fine". We'd go to see it together one more time and bought it. Ditto for all major purchases, including the cars. But for some strange reason, he's always been involved in mattress purchases. In fact, I think the last time we shopped together was ten years ago when we bought the prior one.

So we made our way through the mattress stores of Rochester, because John believes in comprehensive comparison shopping. One stop was HOM furniture, a place that was new to both of us. We discovered a very tall bed, so high that it had step ladders on either side and cupboards underneath. As this was tucked into a distant corner of the building we began horsing around. You might think that John and I spend all our time being grown up and responsible, but in fact we both have a real weakness for absurd humor. I was pretending to do Olympic gymnastic vaults off the steps and onto the bed. John opened the cupboard doors below the bed and was crawling around inside, exploring. But in the distance I spotted a salesperson coming into view so hastily we resumed our "responsible adult shopper" personas and began asking appropriate questions like, "How much does this mattress cost?"

Now that little vignette is the reality of the ministry. To avoid giving offense, much of the time we behave in a more sedate fashion than we might if John weren't a pastor. But I'm glad that we are finally getting to the point of comfort that we can inject some humor into the tedious task of mattress shopping. Because, you have to admit, it's pretty awkward, not to mention boring, to go from store to store, lying down fully clothed on a series of mattresses in front of a sales person. Not to mention that in every store we ran into someone from church!

So if my true self is revealed in mattress shopping, Paul reveals his in 2nd Corinthians. And it is not necessarily the person we expect to see. Paul is no less admirable because he's honest enough to admit that the Corinthians are breaking his heart. He reveals a more vulnerable inside than he does in his other letters, but in doing so helps all of us relate to him more clearly. He becomes one of us, by showing us what makes him suffer.

At the beginning of this study we talked about two words which characterized 2nd Corinthians: **Reality** and **Community**. We hear reality in the unvarnished way Paul communicates with this church. We see community in his desire to draw near to them and love them.

Let's think for a moment about the ground we've covered in 2nd Corinthians.

- In chapter 1, we saw the comfort we experience in God benefits not just us but others.
- In chapter 2 we saw how God brings about his plans in our collective lives and talked about forgiveness.
- In chapter 3 we looked at the shared lives of pastor and congregation, then considered how the glory of God is revealed to us in Christ.
- In chapter 4 we thought about having our spiritual treasure in jars of clay.
- In chapter 5 we considered our shared future in heaven because of our redemption in Christ.
- In chapters 6 and 7 we looked at shared obedience, and discovered how our joint commitment to follow God helps us.
- In chapters 8 and 9 we saw how our giving and shared resources affect the health of the entire community.
- In chapter 10 we considered shared danger – looking at the nature and the weapons we possess for spiritual warfare.
- In chapter 11 we looked at shared discernment and discovered what it meant to be collectively, spiritually discerning.
- In the first half of chapter 12 we heard about shared strength in Christ, noting that Paul's strength came from Christ rather than himself.
- And here we are in chapters 12 and 13, finishing up with Shared Purpose: God's truth will prevail in our lives and in our churches.

But notice that the overarching theme of each week was the idea that we SHARED something. And generally we discovered that our faith in Christ is not just the personal, individual experience that we sometimes mistake it for, but our faith is also a part, a brick or a stone in the larger structure which is the Body of Christ, the church. Truly, as John Donne wrote, no man is an island.

So we come to the end of 2nd Corinthians, where we see:

I. What Motivates a Pastor (2 Cor. 12:11-21)

Look at 2 Cor. 12 beginning with verse 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. The things that mark an apostle – signs, wonders and miracles, - were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

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. 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? Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you.

Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? 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?

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. 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. 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.” (2 Cor. 12:11-21)

I read this whole passage so you could hear the plea in Paul’s voice and get a sense for what motivates him. And the first motive we see is:

A. A passion for the gospel

This drives Paul, but it also needs to be the motivation for any pastor who wants to stay the course. There is so much that makes ministry difficult. From the Corinthians Paul received criticism, misunderstanding of his motives, disappointment in their spiritual condition, discouragement because so little seemed to change.

And these are still the difficulties of ministry today. As a pastor your life is public. As I discovered, we can’t even go mattress shopping without meeting half the church. Therefore all that you do is open to criticism and discussion as well as praise. Often the criticism is constructive. But sometimes it’s devastating.

Then there is the weight of responsibility that comes from teaching God’s word. Who is equal to that task? Every one of my fellow teachers will admit to the heaviness on our shoulders as we prepare and as we stand up here. It’s a humbling thing for a pastor to preach week after week, to prepare regardless of whether he is sick, or distracted, or endlessly busy.

And then in the ministry there is the exposure to people’s joys and sorrows. Often you are walking with others through death, illness, divorce, depression. And sometimes the people who gave you the greatest encouragement through their faith stumble the most awfully.

Now if you were to think that the pastor’s life is only what I’ve just described, you’d be wrong. Because every one of those drawbacks can be turned into triumphs. The public nature of the life gives you a greater exposure to others. You have a chance for wider influence. The weight of the responsibility for teaching can be borne with the help of the Holy Spirit. You share joy as often as sorrow. If you’re with people in hospitals and deathbeds you’re also there for births, dedications, marriages. A pastor must be driven by a passion that the good news of the gospel go out into the world...or else no one could do this job.

You see, in the end, what makes ministry satisfying is this. What could possibly be more fulfilling than glorifying God through your work and your life, fulltime? So if God's glory and a passion for the gospel is not your motivation, the ministry will be a very, very tough place. Paul writes, **"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."** (2 Cor. 12:14) Doesn't that just sum it up? Paul doesn't want their money; he wants THEM. And he wants them so that he may glorify God with the outcome of the gospel in people's lives.

His next motivation is

B. A longing for changed lives

It's not just that he wants to preach the gospel. Paul wants it to take root and to change the Corinthians.

"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." (2 Cor. 12:20) How sad it would be for Paul to arrive in Corinth and to find everyone gone off the rails in his absence. I would hate to come back in a couple of decades and discover that the Women's Bible Study had died out, because I have poured so much of my life into it. Paul had done the same with the Corinthians, and yet he fears that this may not have been enough.

You see, everyone wants to believe that they have done something worthwhile with their lives. And for a pastor to see that people he loves in the congregation are going in a wrong direction or worse, rejecting Christ altogether, is very disheartening. Because even though humanly speaking he cannot do anything about it, he still feels a sense of failure or responsibility, just as we would if our children reject our faith. This sense of spiritual responsibility is what makes the ministry both such a heavy burden and such an extreme joy. You can rejoice when there is progress...and when there is not, you have to remind yourself that in the sovereignty of God no person can forcibly impart faith to another – only God can do that. So if at the end of one's ministry there seemed to be no change in the lives of the congregation, as Paul sometimes implies about Corinth, then it would be pretty disheartening. So Paul was motivated by a longing for changed lives.

We see another motivation:

C. A love for the flock

"So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well." (v. 15)

A good minister takes his pattern from Christ, who loved his own and gave himself for them. It's no accident that a congregation is sometimes referred to as a flock and the pastor as a shepherd. The good shepherd, Jesus, lay down his life for the sheep. And a good pastor will do the same. That is what makes it possible to work a six or seven day work week year in and year out. That is what makes it possible to drop everything and run to the hospital or to the home of a friend who is in crisis. Paul says he does this gladly, spending not only his money to support himself when he should have been financially supported by the Corinthians, but expending his emotion and energy to keep them spiritually safe. His motive is love.

Finally, Paul has

D. A charge from God

“We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.” (2 Cor. 12:19b)

Paul returns again and again to the idea that what he says is for their good. Yes, it may be painful, but he is a man under God’s authority. God has given Paul, and every other pastor, the spiritual responsibility for the people in his care.

Now Paul refers openly to his worst fears. Fear happens very suddenly when we encounter a different situation than the one we expected. My sister in law Karin discovered this one night as she was walking out her back door towards her car in the driveway. At just that moment, a large California black bear came around the corner of her house. They live in the foothills, in an area more built up than my neighborhood. But that didn’t stop this particular bear from making their koi pond, the place where Ron keeps several large and expensive fish, his personal bathtub. So almost every night, he’d come down, sit in the pond, try to catch a fish, and occasionally, looked in their window. But finding a 400 lb bear in your back yard is not comforting, especially when he’s between you and your car.

Paul wasn’t afraid of bears or, apparently, anything that the natural world could deal out. In our passage last week we heard of the physical hardships he faced over time: beatings, shipwreck, starvation, stoning. He didn’t fear what happened to his body. What he feared was what Satan could do when he got in among the church: What Paul feared was **“...quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. 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.” (2 Cor. 12:20-21)** And Paul feared this outcome because it would mean that he had failed in his purpose of bringing God glory through introducing the life-transforming power of the gospel to the Corinthians.

I’m indebted to John Stott’s commentary for this next idea. Look at verse 19: **“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you?”** (v. 19). Why, yes, I thought, Paul has been defending himself through much of this book. But what if Paul’s primary reason was not to defend himself but to use his own life as a pattern for them to imitate?

Then it makes more sense. When your integrity is questioned, act like Paul; he defends himself accurately but not excessively, and he forgives his accusers. When wronged, he forgives. When overtaxed, he doesn’t lose his temper but is patient and forbearing. When insulted, he loves them in return. And why? Because Paul has modeled his own life on Christ’s. And in imitating Paul, a real person with real struggles, we are imitating Christ. “...Paul actively teaches important elements of Christian thought and behavior by means of his manner of life which he deliberately sets before others.” (Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2nd Corinthians*, the John Stott New Testament Series, pg. 183).

Sometimes we get discouraged when imitating Christ, because the sneaking thought comes in that he was able to act the way he did because he was the Son of God. But when we see PAUL acting in the same extraordinary way by the power of Christ, then we are left without excuse. Paul is human like us. If he can do it, then we can too.

So now we know what motivates a pastor: a passion for the gospel, a longing to see lives changed, a love for the flock, and a charge or responsibility from God. But a motivated pastor cannot

necessarily create a healthy church. Paul had all these attributes and yet the church at Corinth was divided, immature, sinful. So the next issue he addresses is:

II. What Makes a Church Work (2 Cor. 13:1 – 14)

In this section Paul gives us four characteristics that need to be in place for a church to function well. Although the passage covers all of chapter 13 I will pull out individual verses rather than read the entire passage straight through.

The first characteristic of a healthy, working church is

A. Commitment to truth

Look at chapter 13 v. 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? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. 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. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” (2 Cor. 13:5-8)

In the first five verses of chapter 13 which preceded this Paul talks about coming back to Corinth and conducting an inquiry into some of the church’s sins. This does not sound very loving, and yet we know from personal experience that love includes discipline. Hebrews says, **“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons.” (Hebrews 12:7)** The mark of sonship is discipline. We don’t discipline other people’s kids (although sometimes we wish we could) but we do discipline our own. So Paul shows love to his spiritual children by disciplining them for continuing to sin.

These are serious sins under discussion. We know that sexual sin including incest and fornication was a recurring theme in Corinth, and small wonder, since it was such a debased culture. They ask for proof that Christ was speaking through Paul; he asks for proof that their lives have been changed. Both questions require a commitment to truth telling.

And so he asks them to “test themselves”, to be honest and truthful about whether they are really following Christ. The point of the question is to say, if Christ is in you, then your lives will be different. Don’t fail the test by discovering that you are professing one thing with your mouth and living entirely another with your life. A healthy church has a commitment to biblical truth.

The second characteristic that makes a church work is

B. Submission to Christ

Look at verse 3 of chapter 13:

“He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 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.” (2 Cor. 13:3b-4)

“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.”
(2 Cor. 13:10)

Notice the interplay of weak and strong. We are at our best when we are weak, because then we are relying upon the strength of Christ. Remember 2nd Corinthian chapter 4: **“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Cor. 4:8)**

You see, submission to Christ and his power will keep us from insisting on our own way. Submission to Christ will keep our church on track for the purpose of glorifying God, because that is what Christ considered his work to be when he said to God: **“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17: 4)** And then he explains that the work God gave him to do, the work that would glorify God by bringing many sons to glory, would be bringing the gospel to mankind: **“For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.” (John 17: 2)**

So Jesus submitted to God in order to bring God glory. And we as the church submit to Jesus in order that we, too, might bring God glory.

A third mark of the church that works is

C. Love and peace from God

Look at verse 11:

“...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.” (2 Cor. 13:11)

Love and peace are quite essential in church life. If we truly have a commitment to biblical truth and submission to Christ, love and peace should be the natural outcome, but human nature can make it difficult to be consistently loving, peaceful and forbearing in community. We need supernatural help. That is where the God of love and peace comes in.

And the fourth mark is

D. Fellowship in the Holy Spirit

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Cor. 13:14)

Notice how Paul mentions Jesus first, then God, then the Holy Spirit? He is speaking about the members of the trinity, and their effects in our life, in the order of experience: first we encounter the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, then because of Jesus we understand and encounter the love of God, and then we begin to enjoy the fellowship of the Holy Spirit who changes us and makes us love each other.

When these four marks are present in a church (commitment to truth, submission to Christ, love and peace from God and fellowship of the Holy Spirit) then we will be truly look like the bride of Christ, holy and unblemished.

Now this may sound like it's all theoretical. But the church is made up of you and me. So what do we individually need to do to bring all this about?

III. What Should We Do For Our Church?

The answer lies in the last few verses.

First, we need to

A. Aim for perfection

Paul says this twice: **"...our prayer is for your perfection" (v. 9) "Aim for perfection..." (v. 11)** Is that an achievable goal?

Of course not – if we were trying to do it by ourselves. But to aim for perfection in God's strength is actually a worthy and biblical goal. Jesus said **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)** We cannot be perfect in the flawless sense that God is. But we can be perfect in the sense of mature, complete, fit for the task. With God's help, and by God's grace, we can do that. And what does that perfection look like? It produces Christians in the church who get along. Who serve. Who love. Who give. Who begin to act like Christ.

Now why is it important that each one of us aims for perfection? Because if we all are, we will be glorifying God and doing his work. We won't be waiting for "the church" (which is everyone else) to do it for us.

Secondly we need to

B. Strive for unity

"...be of one mind, live in peace." (v. 11)

If the Corinthians had been of one mind and living in peace, Paul never would have had to write these chapters to them. To have one mind, a mind fixed on Christ, would avoid a lot of the dissension that arises in church life. But again, it's no good if you expect everyone ELSE to be of one mind and live in peace, but don't demand that of yourself.

Finally,

C. Extend the grace of Christ to each other

Think about what it means to extend the "grace of Christ". The grace of Christ permitted him to forgive his killers. The grace of Christ caused him to leave heaven and come to earth. In chapter 8 Paul reminded us: **"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." (2 Cor. 8:9)** Grace is a generosity of spirit that overflows into the lives of others.

When we extend the grace of Christ to each other in our church we learn to forbear and forgive. In a sense we learn to speak each other's language so that we can understand one another.

Our son Nick has always had his own way of doing things. For years it caused me consternation that he could only type with three fingers of one hand. He was remarkably quick for a one handed typist, but I still thought he could do better if he learned the normal method.

During spring break he showed me that he had, in fact, learned to type with both hands, and was picking up a lot of speed. Being Nick, he decided to do this in an unconventional way. There is the traditional keyboard layout, sometimes referred to as "QWERTY" because of the letters on the top row. The QWERTY keyboard was invented in 1866. The order of its letters was determined by the fact that typewriters had keys that jammed if they were struck too close together, and that keyboard has remained despite the fact that we have neither typewriters nor keys anymore.

And then there is the Dvorak keyboard, invented by someone who thought that Qwerty was too cumbersome. Instead, the Dvorak layout puts all the most common letters (like vowels) on the home row. And, amazingly, there are enough people in the world using it so that you can switch a command in your computer's innards to make the keyboard respond to a Dvorak layout. In fact, the fastest typist in the world, 212 wpm, uses Dvorak.

So what this means for our family, since we all use a single computer at home, was that I'd sit down and discover I was typing nonsense. Because when I thought I was typing the letter "A" the Dvorak keyboard thought I was typing a "T" and so on. This was amusing the first time it happened, because Nick was around to restore the computer's settings. But then, one day after he'd returned to college, I inadvertently hit a series of keystrokes which suddenly made the computer "go Dvorak". I was under a very tight deadline. I couldn't reach him. And I couldn't even explore the help menu because every keystroke I did meant something different. This was frustrating. It was like waking up and discovering that suddenly everyone spoke Swahili and I could only speak English. Finally, of course, I managed to work it out by going online (where somehow the Dvorak curse did not extend), but I also had to give some thought to extending the grace of Christ to Nick. This was my computer, and I use it for many tasks from Bible study to John's sermons to work. And to suddenly have my computer speaking a different language was truly disconcerting. But I had to remember...it was speaking Nick's language. And that language was helpful to him.

This happens to us all the time in church life. We think we are on the same page as someone and discover that they have a differing theological view. Or they are irritated by something that pleases us in worship. We have to be willing to extend the grace of Christ to each other so that, in a sense, we can resume speaking the same language and begin communicating once again. After all, we're all on the same keyboard. So aim for perfection, strive for unity, and extend the grace of Christ to each other.

Study Intensive questions for Shared Purpose

Memory verse: “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” (2 Cor. 13:8)

1. Look at 2 Cor. 12:11- 21. Paul uses several words that convey tension or high emotion. Name some of these. Do you get the sense that Paul is mastering his emotions appropriately? What advice do we find elsewhere in the N.T. on how to master emotions like anger or jealousy?
2. What are Paul’s great fears about the Corinthian church? Name at least two, with their verses. How does he plan to handle the situation if things are going wrong with the church? How do you think Paul knows what to do in this very difficult situation? How can we handle difficult situations, especially where we believe ourselves to be in the right and others in the wrong?
3. A picture of Jesus Christ is given in these verses. How does Paul describe Christ? Is this an accurate picture? Now find two verses that Christ used to describe himself, in his own words. Did he give the same picture of himself as Paul did in these chapters?
4. Paul says that we should “test ourselves”. How can we test ourselves to see if we are in the faith? What will we be looking for? How can we be sure? Draw in other passages that support your answer. If someone believed they were failing that test, what would you advise them to do?
5. Paul says that we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. (v. 8) Does that mean that truth stands up for itself and we don’t have to speak up for it? How can we reconcile this verse with what we see in the culture around us – where the truth is seemingly getting squelched right and left? Find a biblical character who stood up for the truth, to his seeming detriment.
6. Is it wise to “aim for perfection” as Paul says in 2 Cor. 13:11? What kind of perfection does he mean? Is aiming for perfection the same as “perfectionism”? If not, how are they different? What other advice do we have from the Bible about being perfect?

Discussion Questions for Shared Purpose

1. Paul says in 2 Cor. 12: 19, after saying some rather harsh things, that “...everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.” Do you feel strengthened when someone rebukes or criticizes you? How can we learn to take criticism or disagreement in such a way that it strengthens or helps us rather than destroys us? Give some practical suggestions.
2. Paul also suggests in 2nd Cor. 13:5 that we examine or test ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. What kind of questions might we ask ourselves to see if we are in the faith? How can a person know?
3. Is it wise to “aim for perfection” as Paul says in 2 Cor. 13:11? What kind of perfection does he mean? Is aiming for perfection the same as “perfectionism”? If not, how are they different?

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