

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

August 28, 2022

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Credentials of Authenticity**

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 10-13)

#### **A Final Exam...in August?**

(2 Corinthians 13)

Study #4

#### **Introduction: Critical prep for a crucial self-exam...**

Back when I was a student taking classes in school, test day usually meant I was in store for a late night of study before that day.

Even today, the thought of “test day” conjures up painful images of cramming my cranium with facts to do well on an exam.

Preparing by way of study was critical for success on test day.

This morning, Paul wraps up the letter we have been exploring for some months. He challenges us to examine ourselves. Take a test. A spiritual test.

And as is the case with other tests, advance preparation for this test if necessary if we are to pass with flying colors.

Here’s the background to this passage.

Paul was making plans to visit the Corinthian church soon, and he was concerned to prepare the Christians there for that visit. He was going to see how things were going in the church, and he really wanted them to do well on his inspection.

In fact, the main theme here is Paul’s passion for the Corinthian believers’ approval before God.

#### **A Passion For God’s Approval (vv. 1-10)**

##### **Caring Enough To Confront (vv. 1-4)**

*Paul’s past and future visits to Corinth (v. 1a)*

**[1a] This is the third time that I am coming to you.**

The first time he went to Corinth, he brought the Gospel with him. He led people to Jesus and established them in God’s truth.

The second visit was tougher. He came to them “*in sorrow*” (2:1) because of terrible problems in the church.

Now, he’s coming to see them again. I wonder how the Corinthians might have been feeling when they heard that?

Probably like I used to feel when the professor would say, “*Tomorrow you will be tested over the material in chapters 1-12.*”

I suspect that some of the Christians in Corinth would have been squirming over news of Paul’s visit. What follows validates my guess at their squirmy-ness.

On the way to getting to the main point, I’m skipping ahead to verse 4, where Paul makes remarks about *strength* and *weakness*.

First, he draws our attention to two strikingly dissimilar aspects of Jesus’ story.

*Strength and weakness*

The paradox of Jesus’ life and ministry

**[4a] For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God.**

Death is the ultimate weakness, and weakness was seen in Jesus' crucifixion. He was the Prince of Life, and yet was defeated by the power of death.

Sure, He was crucified because of our sin. But Paul means to say that Jesus' death showed His weakness. He allowed Himself to become weak and to be put to death.

Part 1 is weakness. The, there is Part 2.

Following crucifixion came resurrection. Resurrection shows power. We see strength in Jesus' resurrection. The cords of death couldn't hold Him. He left the tomb and now lives, triumphant.

So, we see in Christ both strength and weakness. First, His weakness. Then, His strength.

Paul mentions this strength / weakness mix because we see the exact same mix is him.

#### The paradox of Paul's life and ministry

***[4b]...For we too are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you.***

Nine times in this letter, Paul has characterized himself as weak, and for various reasons.<sup>1</sup> But Paul was willing to be strong when he came to visit Corinth this third time.<sup>2</sup>

The Corinthians had been demanding to see tangible proof of Paul's claims to an apostle. OK. Paul will give them their proof.

He'll even exercise discipline against them if that is necessary.

*Paul's willingness to confront*

***[1b] ON THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES, EVERY MATTER SHALL BE CONFIRMED.<sup>3</sup> [2] I have previously said when I was present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone, [3] since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you...***

Things are going to come to a head in Corinth. When Paul arrives, he's going to find out what's really going on.

If there is an accumulation of sin in the church, he'll be as strong as need be to rectify the situation.

But he doesn't want that to happen. He wants them to be doing well when he arrives so that no discipline will be necessary.

So, before they are tested by his presence, he urges them to take another test. He wants his friends to examine themselves. That self-test is the preparation that will enable them to pass the test of his presence with flying colors.

Taking this test could very well reveal to them the errors of their way. THAT could result in genuine repentance and in a righting of the wrongs he has mentioned throughout the letter. And THAT would result in Paul visiting them in gentleness rather than in severity.

#### **Caring Enough to Urge Others to Self-Examination (vv. 5-6)**

***[5] Test<sup>4</sup> yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you - unless indeed you fail the test?***

<sup>1</sup> This should be encouraging to us. If we are experiencing weakness, trouble, hardship, pain, and suffering, we are falling in line with an apostolic norm.

<sup>2</sup> When Paul says, "***yet we will live with Him***" he is not speaking about living with God in a future resurrection. He's saying that he will come to Corinth with the power and authority of the living Christ.

<sup>3</sup> Here, Paul quotes Deut. 17:6.

<sup>4</sup> "Test" generally has the idea of "tempt" as at 1 Cor 7:5; 10:9, Gal. 6:1; 1 Thess. 3:5. The Greek word used to describe this self-examination process is the word used to describe Jesus' "temptation" by Satan in the wilderness. Here, the idea is more positive, also not an unknown use of the word.

***[6] But I expect that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test.***

*What is at issue in the "test"?*

There is a lot at stake in figuring out what Paul is talking about here. Getting the right understanding of this passage matters a lot. This is not just an academic question.

Here's the question.

Is this self-examination, this test, for the purpose of validating - or not - that the Corinthians (or we?) are saved?

Or is this test for the purpose of evaluating the health of our walk with Jesus?

It's tempting to quickly jump to the conclusion that Paul is talking about whether someone is or is not going to heaven when they die.

Over time I have become convinced that the test Paul has in mind relates to something else. And I'm going to give you my reasons for that conviction.

First, there is the matter of assurance of salvation.

*The issue is living for Jesus!*

#### The value and means of assurance of salvation

It is clear from the New Testament that God wants His children to be confident that they have eternal life. He wants us to know that we are His.

There are lots of verses I could reference on this point. But the clearest may be this:

***[1 John 5:13] These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.***

John wrote what he wrote in his first letter to give assurance of salvation to his readers. And that assurance is based on one thing. They believe in the name of the Son of God. They believe in Jesus.

The biblical diagnostic to determine if someone has eternal life is to simply ask, *"Do you believe in Jesus?"*

If we tie assurance of salvation to anything else, we guarantee that we will never have assurance.

If I base my assurance on my behavior, I'll always have doubts, if I'm honest. So will you, if you're honest. Because we all sin.

None of us is as good as we should be or as good as we might be.

So, we'll always be asking, *"OK, just how good do I need to be to be good enough to pass the behavior test for assurance?"* - and it will never be enough.

Far better to ask, *"Do I believe in Jesus, the One who died and rose for me and guarantees me eternal salvation?"*

If the answer to that question is, *"Yes!"*, then that person can be assured that they have eternal life because of God's promise that the one who believes has eternal life. (See, for instance John 3:16.)

For this reason, I believe Paul's "test" (which IS undoubtedly a test of lifestyle) was not given to find out who was and who was not a Christian.

For another, Paul was writing to Christians.

Of course, "Jesus Christ is in you"!

***[5b]...Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you...?***

Paul asks that question rhetorically and ironically.<sup>5</sup>

Without question, the answer to this question is “Yes!” They knew that Jesus was in them. Paul knew that Jesus was in them.

At no point in this whole letter does Paul ever express doubt about the salvation of the Corinthians. He assumes it throughout.<sup>6</sup> He has consistently addressed the Corinthians as true-blue believers in Jesus.

Sure, they were believers in Jesus who had problems of various kinds (and what believer in Jesus doesn’t), but they were believers.

Here, as always, context is king when it comes to interpretation.

Paul wrote to a church in Corinth that struggled with all kinds of problems. Yet Paul consistently affirmed their salvation. He had no doubt that they were saved. He was the one who led them to Christ!<sup>7</sup>

And here at the very end of the letter, when he is telling them how to prepare for his arrival in Corinth, he reminds them that Jesus Christ is in them.

He then urges them to take a test, a test that they might fail, but a test that Paul has taken and passed. Hear the whole thought again.

Paul took and passed the test; we should, too!

***[5] Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you - unless indeed you fail the test?***

<sup>5</sup> The way Paul phrases the question indicates Paul’s confidence that they do know, at least at some level, the indwelling presence of Christ in their lives.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this letter, Paul has repeatedly assumed the salvation of his readers. Consider: The letter was written to the church of God and the saints who are throughout Achaia - 1:1; Paul’s hope for them is firmly grounded in that they share the same sufferings and comfort Paul does - 1:7; he assumes their prayers on his behalf - 1:11; In their faith they were standing firm - 1:24; they are Paul’s letter of commendation as an apostle - 3:2; the life of Jesus works in them - 4:12; he exhorts them to not be bound together with unbelievers - 6:14; they were made sorrowful

***[6] But I expect that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test.***

TEST THE SOLIDNESS OF YOUR WALK WITH JESUS

So, if, as I am saying, he is NOT calling their salvation into question when he invites them to self-examination, what is he inviting them to examine?

He’s inviting them to test whether their life displays the reality of the Jesus within. Is Jesus working in and through them?<sup>8</sup>

The phrase “*in the faith*,” as Paul uses it here, doesn’t mean “*truly a Christian*.”

Given the context, to be “*in the faith*” is to be “*solid in the faith*.”<sup>9</sup> It is always appropriate for Christians to examine whether we are solid in the faith, solid in our walk with Jesus.

And, yes, it is altogether possible that we might take that test - and fail.

TO FAIL THIS TEST

Paul didn’t fail this test. He passed with flying colors. His walk measured up to his talk.

When writing in his first letter to these same Corinthians, he described how he lived his life before God.

according to the will of God - 7:9; he calls them brethren - 8:1; he says that they abound in faith and utterance and knowledge and earnestness and love - 8:7; he considers them his spiritual children - 12:14.

<sup>7</sup> Their being saved are his credentials for apostleship!

<sup>8</sup> So writes Grant Hawley in The Guts of Grace.

<sup>9</sup> See the following passages where this phrase is used in the sense of being solid in the faith, living out the faith: Acts 14:22; Romans 14:1; 1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Corinthians 1:24; Colossians 2:6-7; Titus 1:13; 1 Peter 5:8-9. This is the way The Message version of the Bible renders the phrase here.

***[9:26] Therefore I run in such a way as not to run aimlessly; I box in such a way, as to avoid hitting air; [27] but I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified / fail the test.***

Paul lived for the pleasure of God. He lived for the prize Jesus wanted him to have. He lived passionately so as to not fail the test he's urging the Corinthians - and us - to take.<sup>10</sup>

To fail this test is not to be unsaved. It is for the child of God to live in a way that doesn't please God.

Failing the test means that we won't hear the Lord's "Well done!" in glory, we won't receive the rewards Jesus wants to give us on the other side, and we won't enjoy the abundant life He promises for here and now.

#### TO PASS THIS TEST

Paul wants us to evaluate the level of Christian authenticity we are experiencing and that we're displaying in our daily walk.

The whole letter of 2 Corinthians is a call to an authentic Christian life.

It rings true that here at the end, he would call his readers - them and us - to finally reckon with how authentic our own lives are.<sup>11</sup>

Over the time we have been looking into this letter, we have seen several marks of authenticity. We have noted that a Christian who is truly walking with God will manifest several marks.

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<sup>10</sup> As C. K Barrett writes, "The Corinthians had been testing Paul's apostolic status. He says that they have been testing the wrong person; they should be testing themselves!"

<sup>11</sup> In the Bible Knowledge Commentary, David Lowery writes, "Throughout the letter of 2 Corinthians Paul has shown us how he scrutinized himself and his ministry, how he evaluated himself, how he sought to manifest the power of Jesus. Now he hands the lens to the Corinthians, with the challenge that they consider their own conduct. Paul's question is usually construed with regard to positional justification: were they Christians or not? But **it more likely concerned practical**

- They will show compassion to those who are suffering. (chapter 1)
- They will work to restore those who have sinned and repented. (chapter 2)
- They will pursue an honest relationship with God. (chapter 3)
- They will share the Good News of Jesus with others. (chapter 5)
- They will grow in the grace of generously supporting God's work in the world. (chapters 8-9)
- They will exult in their own weakness so that the power of God will shine through them. (chapters 4, 10-12).

This is not an exhaustive list of ways we can please God. But they are the major ways Paul highlights in 2 Corinthians.

I think that these are reliable test questions we can pose to ourselves to determine if we are living out the reality of Christ in us.

Again, when Paul wrote what he did about taking a self-test, he assumed that Jesus was *in* the people to whom he wrote.

What he didn't assume was that they lived in a conscious awareness that He was in them - and that they were allowing that awareness to have its life-changing impact.<sup>12</sup>

So, what is the counsel Paul gives us to escape sinful patterns and to pursue the marks of authenticity?

Examine yourself. Invite the Spirit of God to search your heart, soul, mind, and body to see if there is any hurtful way in you.

**sanctification: did they demonstrate that they were in the faith (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13) and that Christ was in them by their obeying His will?** (Emphasis mine.) Understood in this way, to fail the test is NOT to not have Christ in them, but to fail to show His power in their lives through obedience."

<sup>12</sup> In speaking to these Corinthians, he expressed fear that they might be involved in terrible sins (12:20-21). Yes, it is possible for redeemed people to be involved in such things. Who among us has not been guilty of one or more of these since having been redeemed?

Open Scripture and allow its light to shine on you. Use it as a mirror to reflect back to you who you really are.

With Paul's words ringing in our ears - *"TEST YOURSELVES!"* - let's each ask ourselves, *"Are the marks of an authentic life with Jesus MINE?"*

Is there a disconnect between who I am - a child of God through faith in Jesus - and the way I live?

If there is disconnect, then Paul would say it is because I haven't fully reckoned with the reality that Jesus is in me.

To the extent that I, a believer in Jesus, am not living with the presence of Jesus at the forefront of my mind, to that extent I am living in-authentically. Same for you.

And unless we live with this reality front and center - Jesus is in me! - the downward spiral away from authenticity will continue.

We will have less and less interest in spiritual things, we will be assailed by doubts about our condition, and the Spirit's whisper that we are His will be drowned out by static of our apathy.

Remember that at the beginning this morning, Paul told the Corinthians that he was willing to come to them with the authority of Christ, to rebuke them for sin, to even discipline them if necessary. **He cared enough to confront.**

Paul has now gone one step beyond that and **cares for them enough to challenge them to self-examination.** And that is what the Word of God does for each one of us this morning.

We aren't to examine our neighbor or spouse or children or parents. We are to examine ourselves to see if we are solid in the faith.

And now Paul takes his concern and care for these Corinthians one step farther. He **cares for them so much that he prays for them.**

### **Caring Enough to Pray (vv. 7-9)**

***[7] Now we pray to God that you do nothing wrong; not so that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, though we may appear unapproved. [8] For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. [9] For we rejoice when we ourselves are weak, but you are strong;<sup>13</sup> this we also pray for, that you become mature.***

There are, here, two prayers.

*For holiness*

First, ***[7] We pray to God that you do nothing wrong.***

What a beautiful, simple prayer.

If you want to show the depth of your love for a friend, simply go to the Lord on their behalf and ask that God would ***"lead [them] not into temptation but deliver [them] from evil"*** (Matthew 6:13; James 1:13) and that He would move them toward holiness.

You know your friend. You know the particular temptations to which he or she is drawn. You can pray that God would strengthen your friend to stand firm against this wrong, against that wrong.

To pray is to make a difference. Prayer is God-centered, loving activism.

*For maturity*

Second, ***[9] This we also pray for, that you become mature.***

<sup>13</sup> It might make Paul look pretty effective as an apostle if the Corinthians started leading holy lives - but he assures us that it is not his own reputation he is

concerned about. It is the welfare of the people for whom he prayed. All that really mattered was the change in their lives.

The first prayer (v. 7) is preventive - *“Keep them from doing anything wrong, Lord!”* This second prayer is curative, *“If they stray, Lord, restore them.”*

The word that my version translates here, *“become mature”* was used in a number of different ways in the first century culture.

It was used to describe the process of setting a broken bone, taming a wild horse, or mending ripped fishing nets.

It always referred to restoring something to its original purpose. And that is the second thing Paul prays for his friends in Corinth.

If they have slipped into sexual sins, sins involving speech, or sins involving violence or drunkenness or anything else, he asks that God would restore them to His purpose for them.

In our role as pray-ers, we trust God to act on the basis of prayers we pray for those we love.

We will get no credit. All the glory will go to God because no one will know that we prayed. But that isn't the point, is it? All that matters is that the life-changing power of God is unleashed in the life of our brother, our sister.

Paul wraps up the body of this long letter by explaining why he written what he has written. It's so that through his willingness to confront, his challenge to self-examination, and his prayers, when he arrives, he can be gentle.

***[10] For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity, in accordance with the authority which the Lord gave me, for building up and not for tearing down.<sup>14</sup>***

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<sup>14</sup> Did the Corinthians respond positively to the warnings in this letter? On the basis of evidence from the book of Romans, David K. Lowery of Dallas Seminary says *“Yes!”* Paul had conditioned the expansion of his ministry in other areas on the problems in Corinth being resolved. He followed the writing of this letter with a

And in the final paragraph (vv. 11-14), Paul calls us to wholeness with five staccato commands.

### **Godly Good-byes (vv. 11-14)**

#### **Final Exhortation (v. 11)**

*Rejoice*

***[11] Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice***

In periods that lend themselves naturally to rejoicing - REJOICE! And at times of spiritual dryness, REJOICE!<sup>15</sup> Healing comes with intentional rejoicing in God.

*Mend your ways*

***[11] Finally, brothers and sisters...mend your ways***

If there is something broken in your life - a net that needs mending, a bone that needs setting, some wildness that needs taming - fit it.

*Be comforted*

***[11] Finally, brothers and sisters...be comforted***

To say, *“I am praying for your comfort”* is one thing. But to command someone to be comforted has a different “feel” to it.

So, try this on for size.

We must each learn to avail ourselves of the comfort of the Holy Spirit when we are in need of comfort.

visit of three months during which time he wrote the letter to the Romans. In that letter he wrote, *“Now...there is no more place for me to work in these regions....”* (Romans 15:23).

<sup>15</sup> Nine times, believers are exhorted to rejoice in this letter.

The Spirit's comfort may be found through prayer, through Scripture, and by being with our friends in Jesus.

And when we have been comforted, we will be able to comfort others with the comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

*Be like-minded*

**[11] Finally, brothers and sisters...be like-minded**

This is not a call to uniformity or to unanimity. We are not all to look the same, act the same, or think the same thing on every issue.

But we are to ***"be like-minded."***

The picture is of a church filled with a great diversity of people, all looking outward together, standing shoulder to shoulder, working toward the same end of glorifying God.

*Live in peace*

**[11] Finally, brothers and sisters...live in peace;**

Here are the members of a congregation facing inward, looking at each other, working through problems rather than avoiding them or each other.

And when all of this is in place, ***"...the God of love and peace will be with you."***

Then, right before his benediction, Paul tells us how to greet each other.

**Final Greetings (vv. 12-13)**

***[12] Greet one another with a holy kiss. [13] All the saints greet you.***

Have you been wondering what I was going to say about verse twelve ever since we started the book of 2 Corinthians?

Well, I'm ready for you. I have done a rather extensive biblical study of "kissing." I discovered that four times Paul, and once Peter, exhorted Christians to greet each another with *"holy kisses."*

In biblical times, kisses were routinely exchanged at important moments.<sup>16</sup>

But why the emphasis on kissing? Why did Paul not simply say, ***"greet one another"*** - and leave it at that? Why the exhortation to a physical display of affection?<sup>17</sup>

I wonder if Paul is touching on something buried deep in our humanness when he urges physical, non-sexual touch.

Certainly, physical touch is not the only manifestation of love, and it isn't required to communicate love.

But physical expressions can be meaningful expressions. An abrazo (a hug) or a hearty handshake or a hand on a shoulder can go a long way toward expressing the love you feel for a brother or a sister in Christ.

If you are naturally reserved, those suggestions may be threatening.

But if you try to go just a little bit beyond your comfort zone to show the people you love that you love them by touch, you may find yourself liberated to actually love them more.

<sup>16</sup> When the church took communion, at baptism, when a candidate was received for ordination and when a repentant sinner was received back into the fellowship after reconciliation.

<sup>17</sup> The word for "kiss" comes from the same word as "love" (*φιλεω*).



(At any rate, it will be interesting to see how we greet each other at the close of the service this morning...)

### **Conclusion: Final Blessing/Benediction (v. 14)**

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is a passionate appeal to live authentically for Jesus. In these thirteen chapters, we have learned much.

- God's strength shines best through weak vessels - like us.
- Restoring the broken is a vital part of life in the church of Jesus.
- We can be open about our struggles, real in our relationships.
- Everything in life - even our money - can provide an opportunity to express gratitude for the gift God has given us.
- The Christian life is not a bed of roses; it is a stage on which we can prove the depth of our love for God.
- Thorns in our flesh may make life hard, but God is always good and living for His pleasure is always worth it!

So, Paul can do no better than dismiss us with this wonderful benediction at verse fourteen.

***[14] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.<sup>18</sup>***

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<sup>18</sup> Note the trinitarian formula. This is one of the clearest evidences in the New Testament of the Trinity.