

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 3 June 2007

No. T0472

Speaker: Mr. Glenn Baxter

The Power of a Minister - 2 Corinthians 12 and 13

Today we have the final talk on 2 Corinthians. The overall title for this series of talks has been "Christian ministry and the minister" with the previous five talks being individually entitled:

- "The cost of ministry" for chapters 1, 2 and 3,
- "The motive for ministry" for chapters 4 and 5,
- "The consequences of ministry" for chapters 6 and 7,
- "Ministry in giving" for chapters 8 and 9, and
- "The marks of a minister" for chapters 10 and 11.

Our heading for this final talk is "The power for a minister" and we shall be looking at the last two chapters of 2 Corinthians; chapters 12 and 13. Let me start by 12:9, a key verse in our section today: "And He, that is, the Lord said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." I am reading from the Authorised Version of the Bible. We see from this verse that the power for a minister, today's title, is the power of Christ Himself.

I would like to divide these two chapters into four sections.

- 12:1-4: Paul's vision.
- 12:5-18: Not Paul's abilities but Christ's power.
- 12:19-13:10: A warning.
- 13:11-14: The conclusion.

Paul's vision

Our first section contains Paul's vision. Let me read 12:1-4: "It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

While the beginning of verse 2 attributes the vision to an unnamed man in Christ, it is clear from verse 7 that that man is Paul himself. The wonder of this vision remained vividly with him 14 years after the event. In the vision, he was caught up to the third heaven, the highest place referred to in the Bible, to paradise, in the presence of God Himself. There he heard of things which human words cannot describe and even if they could, as a man Paul was not permitted to pass on these things to other men.

Paul never wants boastfully to draw attention to himself. That is one reason why he refers to the vision being given to the unnamed man in Christ. However, I suggest that there is another reason. Paul may well be wanting to draw attention to what is the position of any born again Christian, because every true believer, man or woman, is covered by the phrase "a man in Christ." In 1 Corinthians 15:44-50, Paul wrote about two races of people. The first race is Adam's race and every human being is born into that race. Like Adam, that race is earthly. But the second race is based on the Lord from heaven and every true believer is part of that heavenly race. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation." So the man in Christ has access to great, heavenly things beyond the understanding of Adam's race. These things are not just available to the apostles, but to any man in Christ. My passport confirms that I am a British citizen. I am very happy to be a British citizen. But I am even happier to know that my new citizenship is in heaven and that gives me divine and eternal blessings which neither British nor any other earthly citizenship brings.

Not Paul's abilities but Christ's power.

Our second section covers 12:5-18 which I am calling 'Not Paul's abilities but Christ's power'. As Paul begins verse 1 of this chapter, so he continues in verse 5 that he does not glory or boast in himself but he will boast in his infirmities or weaknesses. What a strange thing to say!

In attempting to explain this, let me first of all read 12:7-8: "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." Paul had been greatly privileged to hear the amazing things in his vision. In order for Paul not to become puffed up by these revelations, God gave him this "thorn in the flesh" to remind Paul constantly of his own limitations. We just don't know what disability comprised Paul's thorn in the flesh, but it was sent by God for this particular purpose and would not be pleasant - verse 7 uses the word "buffet." Amazingly, verse 7 also tells us that God used Satan to implement this thorn. What a wonderful Scripture to remind us that, while Satan's powers are great, he can only operate within limitations imposed by the all-powerful God! We can't understand why God permits Satan to have such powers but God is referred to in Ephesians 1:11 as "Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will."

It is interesting to note from verse 8 that as soon as Paul had this problem, he turned to prayer. This was not just a light prayer but a deep beseeching that the Lord might remove this problem. But it was not to be and Paul seemed to recognise this by only praying in this way three times. We can't help but think that the Lord also prayed in a deep beseeching way three times in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We now come to the key verse 9 which I read earlier and which begins: "And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." What lovely comforting words which come down the ages to all believers in whatever circumstances: "My grace is sufficient for thee"! As I came to this precise point in preparing this talk, a dear Christian lady from the church I attend came to my door. She was scheduled to go into hospital the next day for an operation and I shared with her these comforting words from the Lord. Dear listener, if you feel that your circumstances are very trying, almost too hard to bear, these words of the Lord come to you in all their love and power: "My grace is sufficient for thee." He knows, He loves, He cares and no circumstance is beyond His wonderful grace.

For Paul the minister, the message was that this thorn was to continue. But if the thorn made Paul feel inadequate in his service, actually that was a good thing for it is in that recognition of my personal weakness, that Christ's strength comes in. So Paul boasted in his weaknesses because these in fact allowed the power of Christ to come in and take over. Someone else has paraphrased the last words of verse 9 as "that the strength and power of Christ may pitch a tent over me."

Here then, is the true power of a minister, be it Paul or someone today. If I rely on my own resources, my service for the Lord will fail. It is only through the power of the Christ of God that I can minister or serve to the glory of God. Is it the power of Christ, rather than of myself, that I am relying on for my service for Him?

Paul goes on in 12:10 to draw a conclusion from his argument. He had suffered many things as a minister of Christ, describing them in this verse as infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions and distresses. But he had learned actually to take pleasure in these things because in those times of natural weakness when he couldn't rely on himself, he knew that he was relying solely on the power and strength of Christ, so that, at the end of verse 10, he makes the paradoxical statement: "for when I am weak, then am I strong."

In the remainder of this second section, from verses 11-18, Paul is stressing that he truly is an apostle and has demonstrated the qualities of a true minister of Christ. And these attributes and qualities of an apostle and a minister had been demonstrated for 18 months in the very presence of the Corinthian Christians on Paul's first visit to them. They themselves had seen Paul perform the actions that indicate a genuine apostle, as outlined in 12:12, that is patience, signs, wonders and mighty deeds.

In these verses, 12:11-18, Paul also draws our attention to some of the qualities which ought to be seen in a minister of Christ. He did not want to be burdensome to them by taking from them - see verses 13, 14 and 16. He did not craftily use any who assisted him indirectly to gain from them - see verses 16-18. He sought to care and provide for them, like a spiritual parent - see verse 14. He was willing to go to the very limit of his energy to benefit them - see verse 15. He continued to love them, and love them abundantly, even when his love was not returned - see verse 15.

Please note these qualities of a true minister of Christ; these same qualities ought to be seen in every servant of Christ today. I find this a great challenge. And please also note that these qualities were demonstrated consistently over an extended period of time right in Corinth where these Christians lived. Paul wasn't just a man who talked about

principles; what he said, he lived out! What a commendation it is when a minister or a servant of Christ today really does live out what he or she says, through the power of Christ!

A warning

Now to our third section, from 12:19 to 13:10, which I have given the heading of 'a warning'. Some of the Christians in the church at Corinth had a strained relationship with Paul. I deliberately say that the strain in the relationship was from the side of the Corinthians. As far as Paul was concerned, he loved all the Christians at Corinth but that did not stop Paul from speaking out clearly on the truth of God and the sort of practical living which ought to be seen in Christians. Some of the Christians at Corinth did not like such straight talking and so sought to question Paul's authority as an apostle. Paul as a true minister or servant did not stop loving them, but equally did not stop speaking out when anything fell short of God's truth or standards.

We need to recognise that the apostles of New Testament times had the authority to discipline individuals. For example, in 13:10 the apostle Paul refers to "the power which the Lord hath given me". Notice that this authority comes from "the Lord", the title used when Jesus is being presented as the One with supreme authority. This final message from Paul to the Corinthians, before he concludes his letter to them, is a message of solemn warning, backed by his divinely-given authority as an apostle.

It seems to me that the verses in this section contain some important guidance on applying corrective action in a church today. First let me read 12:19: "Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying."

There are at least three matters of guidance in this verse. The first is that any corrective action is conducted before God, in the right manner and in the light of God's word. This means also that the motives for the correction are righteous ones which stand up in the sight of God. Secondly, the corrective action is carried out in a loving way. Before going into his serious warning, Paul addresses all of them in this verse as "dearly beloved". There is a fine balance between dealing adequately with a problem and yet not being legalistic as the Pharisees were. Thirdly, the aim of correction ultimately is edifying or building up. This is reinforced at the end of 13:10 where Paul says that the power was given to him "to edification, and not to destruction". Taking corrective action in the appropriate manner builds up the church by dealing with sin and also aims to build up the one or ones being corrected, by urging repentance and ultimate restoration of fellowship with the church.

Paul is telling these Corinthian Christians that they all need to repent and abandon the sinful practices which had marked some of them and he urges them to do it in response to this letter. Otherwise he warns that he will have to address the problem on his next visit to them and will have to use the sharpness of his authority referred to in 13:10. Paul would much rather consider positive matters on the occasion of his visit, but if he has to address their poor state of Christian living he will not hesitate to do so. It was not the way of Paul to avoid any issue or to sweep anything under the carpet. As he writes in 13:2: "... I write to them which heretofore have sinned, and to all other, that, if I come again, I will not spare."

The two categories of the Corinthians' failings which were troubling Paul are outlined in 12: 20-21. The first category in verse 20 contained sins such as envyings, strifes and backbitings and had to do with their self-will. The second category in verse 21 were more to do with the misuse of the body, sins such as uncleanness and fornication, and had to do with their self-indulgence.

The second sentence of 13:1 reads: "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established". If Paul visited Corinth again and an accusation was raised against a particular Christian, Paul would require more than one witness to support the accusation. This principle was established by God in Old Testament times, for example in Deuteronomy 19:15, and is specifically carried forward into the church period. A further example is in 1 Timothy 5:19 which reads: "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses". We do well to follow that principle today.

Verse 9 reads: "For we are glad, when we are weak, and ye are strong: and this also we wish, even your perfection". It is another statement of Paul's ambition as a minister of Christ. His desire was not for himself, but for the strengthening of the believers in Corinth whom he was serving. He wanted and prayed for them to grow spiritually so that they were maturing in Christian things. More lessons for ministers of Christ today! Those we serve should be more important to us than ourselves and should be in our prayers, desiring spiritual progress for them.

So, this third section is a solemn one, containing a warning to these Christians in Corinth who were erring. At the same time it is interesting to note the lessons in it for ministers of Christ today and for handling the always difficult matters of correction.

The Conclusion

Lastly, we come to the fourth section of our considerations, the conclusion to the epistle, contained in 13:11-14. In this 2 Corinthians, Paul has had to confront a number of issues relating to inappropriate behaviour and attitudes amongst some of the church at Corinth. No issue has been avoided and there has been some straight speaking which must have hit the consciences of those believers who needed to change their ways. Now in these last words of this letter, this minister of Christ desires to finish on an uplifting note and from this again there are lessons which we can learn.

Let me read verses 11-13: "Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Greet one another with an holy kiss. All the saints salute you." Paul starts by calling them brethren. Whatever the faults and difficulties, he and they remained united by this lovely Bible term, brethren. Nothing he has had to say breaks that unity and he wants to convey to them the warmth of his feelings for them. He then tells them to face up to the challenges, to operate as mature Christians, to encourage and comfort each other. If they do these things, the very God of love and peace will be with them. It isn't that God was not with His people in Corinth, but if they themselves were not living together in the way Paul instructs, they could not enjoy the presence of the God who is the author of love and peace.

In verse 13, he conveys to them the salutations of all the saints, all the believers where Paul was when he wrote this letter. What a tremendous thing to know that there are links of affection across the world between all believers, whether we have met them or not. And the salutations were from all the believers, again emphasising that the problems at Corinth did not stop all believers from uniting in their love for each other.

Finally, we come to the last verse, verse 14. What a great verse, used by many believers over the years! It is one of the verses which demonstrates the truth of the teaching on the Trinity. We often refer to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that may well be the order most often used in the New Testament. But in this verse, the order is Son, Father and Holy Spirit. Perhaps the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ comes first because it is that grace, the undeserved favour of the Lord Jesus Christ, which the Corinthians, in all their needs, had to be aware of first, before they could appreciate the love of God and then enjoy the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. If the Corinthians really thought about this verse when they read it, they would be both humbled and encouraged that Divine Persons were bestowing such favours on them.

At the end of this series on 2 Corinthians, I can't do better than read this final verse to you: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen".

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.