

GOD WITH US
Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 10 – 2 Corinthians
A Heart Opened Wide
2Corinthians 8-13

Introduction

Much of 2Corinthians consists of a defense of Paul's apostleship in the face of doubts on the part of the Corinthian church. This defense of his apostleship is interrupted only by two chapters focused on financial giving. Yet, even this section must be viewed in light of the bigger picture. The Corinthians undoubtedly questioned Paul's motives and methods in conducting a large financial campaign among all the Gentile churches, on behalf of the suffering church in Jerusalem. They may have been wavering on their previous decision to participate freely and generously in this financial campaign, due to their questions over the legitimacy of Paul's leadership. Thus, even when dealing with giving, Paul is defending his role and his conduct, all the while imploring them to participate with generous hearts in a campaign to help those who were suffering in Jerusalem. Overall, the letter of 2Corinthians offers to us the greatest and most profound insights into *the heart of a godly leader* that we find anywhere in the New Testament. Because Paul had to defend his apostleship, he had to explain the heart and motives behind his actions. This opens up to us a wealth of teaching on what a godly leader looks like *on the inside*.

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES from 2Corinthians

In 1999, Shirley did an in-depth study of 2Corinthians. She accumulated more than 40 key leadership principles from this book. Below are some of those principles. We hope that they will help you in whatever leadership capacities God calls you to. (You can study the references along with the list, if you care to.)

1. Leaders must experience their own hardships so they can experience God's personal comfort, and thus have compassion towards others' trials, and genuinely offer comfort and hope (1:3-7).
2. Leaders will 'reach their limits' so that they are forced to trust in God, who can take them 'beyond their limits' (1:8-11).

3. Leaders must maintain a clear conscience before God and their followers, leading with 100% integrity and sincerity of heart (1:12).
4. Leaders are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, as He prompts, guides and redirects, despite criticism (1:15-23; 2:12,13).
5. Leaders love their people and are not afraid to express their deep emotions to them (2:1-4).
6. Leaders face people-problems head on, rather than avoiding them in the attempt to please everyone (2:4-6).
7. Leaders understand failure, and lead with mercy, forgiveness and restoration toward those who want to grow (2:7-11).
8. Leaders live for an audience of One, not for the approval of people or for personal gain (2:14-17).
9. Leaders live in deep dependence upon God, not depending upon their own strength, wisdom, abilities or resources (3:4-6).
10. Leaders do not lose heart, even in the tough times (4:1,16).
11. Leaders set for the truth plainly, and remain pure before God and before men. They lead and live “in the sight of God” (4:2-6).
12. Leaders remain humble, knowing they are fragile jars of clay, through whom the power of God shines brightly (4:7-12).
13. Leaders focus on the unseen realities and rewards of eternity, not on the temporal rewards of this life, being renewed inwardly each day (4:16-18). They live by faith, not by sight (5:7).
14. Leaders live to please God, knowing that an account will be given of how one’s life has been conducted (5:9,10).
15. Leaders cultivate a sincere love for others, motivated by the love that Christ has for them personally and for all people (5:14,15).
16. Leaders believe there is hope for anyone to be made new by the power of Christ, if they are ‘in Christ’ through faith (5:16,17).
17. Leaders are ambassadors of Christ, appealing to people to be reconciled to God since Christ has borne mankind’s sin (5:18-21).
18. Leaders take great pains to ensure that the work of God through them is not discredited in any way (6:3-10).
19. Leaders open their hearts wide to their followers (6:11-13).
20. Leaders need other strong leaders to encourage them (7:6,7).

21. Leaders are encouraged and refreshed by the affection of their followers (7:13-16).
22. Leaders praise their followers to others, and call attention to the great works their followers are accomplishing (8:1-6).
23. Leaders do the hard, unashamed work of exhorting people to 1st give themselves fully to God, then to give their resources to advance God's mission in the world (8:7-15).
24. Leaders appoint co-leaders to manage the work well (8:16-18).
25. Leaders are to be transparent with people's resources (8:20,21).
26. Leaders fight God's battles with God's spiritual weapons (10:3-6).
27. Leaders don't measure themselves by other leaders (10:12).
28. Leaders only boast of what God has accomplished (10:13-18).
29. Leaders fight to protect & preserve the truth about Jesus (11:1-5).
30. Leaders will undergo severe hardship, when necessary, to fulfill a God-given mission (11:21-29).
31. Leaders will accept & even boast about their weaknesses if they become opportunities for God's strength to be displayed through them (11:30-33; 12:1-10).
32. Leaders will be poured out for the sake of their followers (12:15).
33. Leaders never give up on their people, rather, they call forth their

We are not expecting you to absorb everything Paul taught about leadership. But hopefully you can see that 2Corinthians IS a sort of textbook of insights and principles on godly leadership. Perhaps you can scan through the above list and pick out a few that seem most relevant to your own situation, and study them through in more detail.

real, God-given potential (13:5-11).

II. Exhortations on Generous Giving: Chs.8-9

We learn more in these two chapters on the subject of giving than anywhere else in Scripture. Below we highlight the main principles that Paul taught, along with brief explanations. As we go through this section, it is good to bear in mind that this financial campaign was a poverty-relief mission. Paul was asking the Christians who were well-off to come to the aid of those who were suffering in

Jerusalem as a result of persecution. This was not a building campaign, rather, a humanitarian relief effort. Certain principles in this section are unique to this specific kind of financial campaign and the admonitions Paul gives concerning it.

1. It is a privilege to be able to give to the Lord's work (8:1-4).

The Macedonians begged Paul for the privilege of participation in the campaign, even though they themselves were suffering and their financial means were limited. Paul used their eagerness as an example for the Corinthians (he had previously used the Corinthians' promises of generosity as an example for the Macedonians!) *Sacrificial giving* is the first note sounded in this key section on giving toward God's work.

2. Mature believers should 'excel in the grace of giving' (8:5-7).

Just as we might demonstrate maturity in exercising other graces (or spiritual gifts) such as faith, speech and love, we can display our growth in Christ through the grace of financial giving. Generous giving *is* ministry and it is a sign of spiritual maturity.

3. We are most like God when we give generously (8:8,9).

The following verse is not only one of the most poetic lines in the Pauline writings, it also contains the key motivation for giving:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (8:9).

4. A desire (pledge) to give should be fulfilled (8:10-12).

A promise to give should be fulfilled, *unless* one's financial situation has drastically changed. Paul was not legalistic about giving; he was both passionate and practical. He wanted people to give from what they had, not from what they didn't have. He did not want covetousness or greed to sneak in and prevent people from fulfilling previous pledges to participate in this campaign.

5. Giving should meet pressing needs (8:13-15).

Giving is intended to 'level the field' so to speak. In this case, those who had an abundance were being invited to share with those who were in need. Giving is never intended to make rich people richer; rather, to meet the needs of those with less. In this context, people's resources were being collected to alleviate suffering believers in Jerusalem who were being persecuted.

6. Giving campaigns need ‘champions’ (8:16-24).

Titus and an unnamed brother were the champions and managers of this campaign. Every financial campaign needs key leaders to explain the purpose, to rally support, guide the effort and protect the funds to ensure a successful result.

7. Financial offerings must be managed forthrightly (8:20-21).

There is no room for mishandling of funds or shady activity when it comes to the offerings of God’s people. Generous giving must be accompanied by careful stewardship of offerings. Otherwise, people will lose heart and withhold offerings in the future.

8. Major campaigns need generous lead donors (9:1-5).

Paul had used the Corinthians’ generous pledge as an example for other regions to *give generously*. Now he was writing to make sure they would be faithful to their pledges, so that his boast about them was not an empty one! Every campaign needs lead donors who, by their generosity, lead the way in encouraging everyone to participate.

9. When possible, we should sow generously (9:6).

The ‘reap what you sow’ principle applies to giving. If we sow generously, we will reap generously (reap as God sees fit; see #11 below). If we sow sparingly, we will reap sparingly.

10. God loves a cheerful giver (9:7).

Giving should always be voluntary, not compulsory. God loves it when we give with a cheerful (literally, ‘hilarious’) heart. Giving with a spirit of compulsion (“I have to give”) does not honor God.

11. God will bless back our generous giving (9:8-11).

God’s return-blessing might come back to us in the form of financial blessings, or in other ways that increase the “harvest of our righteousness.” One way or the other, God *will* honor and reward generous giving.

12. Giving is part of our testimony (9:12-14).

Christians will be encouraged and overflow with thanksgiving to their generous God by our generous giving, and non-Christians will see the tangible reality of our faith in Jesus.

13. God’s gave to us THE Indescribable Gift (9:15).

We can never out-give God! He gave us the gift of His Son. All our ‘generous’ giving should be measured by the sacrifice that God made for us. The word “indescribable” means “speechless,” or “no words can possibly describe it.”

There is a LOT here about giving. As you read through the above 13 points, what stands out to you the most? How is your view of financial participation in God's work impacted by these 2 chapters? Paul uses the generosity of God as the key motivator for generous, willing giving (see 8:9 and 9:15). How does the gift of God (Jesus coming into our world to be God's gift of salvation for us) impact your view of giving?

III. Paul's Apostolic Authority: Chs.10-13

The remainder of 2Corinthians returns to Paul's defense of his apostleship. He reveals things here about his own life that we would not have known had he not been forced to explain himself.

- **The heart of the matter: 10:1-18** They judged him by outward appearances (10:7), looking his writing style, his physical appearance, his manner of speaking, etc. (10:10-11). They saw him as inferior, in comparison with others who had more status in their eyes. Paul had two answers to their view of him.

1. His strength was spiritual not physical, outward or worldly.

"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (10:3-5).

2. When we make comparisons with others, we are misguided.

"We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (10:12).

Today, we live in a culture that prizes and rewards externals (looks, resources, position, personality, education). But while people look at the outward appearances, God "looks at the heart" (1Samuel 16:7). How do you see this focus on externals in your own world? What can you do to reorient your life around the condition of your heart (your inner being) rather than just focusing on externals? Is there a spiritual discipline that you can add to the mix so that your inner person is being renewed day by day (2Corinthians 4:16)?

- **Messengers of deception: 11:1-15** Paul described his shock that the Corinthians were falling for false messages delivered by false “servants of Christ.” This passage is very reminiscent of Galatians chapter 1, where Paul expressed his dismay over them accepting “a different gospel.”

1. He was surprised that the Corinthians were so easily swayed by a different gospel.

“But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough” (11:3-4).

The Corinthians were accepting false doctrine into their church, primarily because they were so impressed by the messengers that they turned a blind eye to the inaccuracies of their messages. They were being led away from the “*simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.*” Most often, these false teachers introduced complex systems of rules and religious laws that people had to follow in order to be ‘right with God.’

2. These other ‘apostles’ were servants of Satan in disguise.

“For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (12:13-15).

Here we learn that the Corinthian problem was deeper than the fact that they were comparing Paul with other *legitimate* apostles (like Peter, Apollos, James and others). They were also comparing him with *false* apostles who were servants of Satan masquerading as “*angels of light.*”

- **Paul’s credentials of suffering: 11:16-23** Paul recounted many of his sufferings for the sake of Christ, all in the attempt to prove that his apostleship was legitimate. He admitted that he was “boasting” here (11:16-18); but he was doing so for their sakes, so

that they might have confidence in him as their God-ordained leader. The other leaders that they were comparing him to were good at self-promoting. So, Paul tells the Corinthians some pretty amazing things that he did, as an apostle of Christ, all to win back their respect and allegiance.

- **Paul's thorn in the flesh: 12:1-10** As a result of the overwhelming visions of heaven that Paul experienced, God allowed him to experience a "thorn in the flesh" (some kind of physical ailment) so that he would not become proud of his God-given experiences. Paul asked God 3 times to take away this ailment, but God replied that His strength would be displayed through Paul's weakness. Thus, Paul determined to rest in the strength of God and to live with the weakness.

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:9-10).

Have you had a "thorn in the flesh" that you have talked to God often about, but He has not removed it from you? While you continue to pray to God about this, it would be wise to also pray that His strength would be made known in and through your weakness. The power of God is most evident in our weaknesses, not in our strengths. Ask God to sustain you through the time of weakness, and to display His power in you.

- **Preparing for his final visit: 12:11-21** Paul was about to make his 3rd and final visit to Corinth, and there were still many problems to be resolved. He was somewhat apologetic for the elongated defense of his apostleship (which might have sounded like boasting); but he explained that his 'boasting' was so that *they* could be confident in the God-given authority as their leader.

"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" (12:19).

- **Concluding admonitions: 13:1-10** As he concluded his letter, Paul used a firm tone. He would come for a final visit, but it

would be decisive in many ways. He would test the sincerity of their faith in Christ *and* their submission to him as a God-ordained apostle, and the one who planted their church.

“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” (13:5,6).

“Examine yourselves, test yourselves”- How do we do this? We look within ourselves for a sincere faith and trust in Jesus Christ. What ‘fruit’ is growing in me that I know comes from being ‘a new creation’ rooted ‘in Christ’ (2Cor 5:17)? Am I more sensitive to my attitudes, words and actions towards God and others? Do I have a humble ‘godly sorrow that leads me to repentance’, ie: a genuine desire to turn away from harmful ways?

Why had he written with such a strong tone? So that they could deal with some things before his arrival, thus making his final visit joyful, not painful.

“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” (13:10).

Discussion Questions

1. Review the principles on leadership. Pick one or two and discuss why they caught your attention.
2. Review the principles on giving from chapters 8 & 9. How do these principles shape your thinking about giving to God’s work?
3. The Corinthians were fixated on external appearances and powerful personalities. How do you see this tendency at work in your world today?
4. What can we do to pay more attention to the condition of our inner man/woman?
5. Can you think of an example of ‘spiritual teaching’ that appears to be good, but upon closer inspection, is really deception?