

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS FOR 2/28/10
2 CORINTHIANS 13:4-15
By Kimberly Grassi

2 Corinthians 13:5-10

Chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians are composed with the intention of exposing the false apostles for who they are, exposing the Corinthians' bent to endure the false teachers with their erroneous doctrines and their boastful ways, and to assert Paul's own apostolic authority to bring truth and light to this church that he founded in response to God's calling. Paul has spent all of chapter 12 responding to the demands of the Corinthians to prove himself. He now turns to them and asks the same. Paul is willing to submit to their tests, to be compared to the false apostles, and to spend himself on their behalf. Are they also willing to look inward and search their own hearts, to examine themselves and to "prove" that they belong to Christ? In Paul's final words to the Corinthians, he encourages them to make the right decision regarding their relationship to him as an apostle of Christ and to mend their ways so that his visit can be one of joy. In 2 Cor. 13:5-10, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to look within and see the evidence of Christ's work among them. Paul prays for them and continues to hold out hope on their behalf.

After reminding his audience that it is not his own power, but the power of God that is directed toward them, Paul now encourages the Corinthians to look inward and determine for themselves whether or not this power is at work among them. Three times in this passage, Paul uses the idea of passing or failing a test in order to drive his point home (13:5, 6, 7). In 13:5, he writes, "Test yourselves to see that you are in the faith." On the surface it may appear that Paul is threatening the Corinthians, but in reality he now makes an appeal to their hearts encouraging them to trust Christ, to look inward, and to allow God to reveal to them whether or not they have been acting according to what they know of their faith. In v. 5, Paul issues two imperatives (test yourselves, examine yourselves) and uses the pronoun "yourselves" three times, in order to turn the attention toward the Corinthians. The same examining, critical eye that they have applied to Paul now needs to be turned inward. The result of the examination is critical, for their very own faith is a result of Paul's ministry so if he is suspect in their eyes, their own faith must be suspect as well. Paul has given ample material to provide the basis of self-examination throughout his letter, and he now asks the members of this community to look at their behaviors and their beliefs about who God is and how he works. Their willingness to submit themselves to this process speaks volumes as to whether or not they will allow God to work in their hearts and their lives. The question is, "Do you recognize Christ at work in your own lives?" The word "recognize" is the Greek word "to know" + the prefix, "thoroughly." In effect Paul is asking them if they thoroughly know by their own experiences that Jesus Christ dwells in them, moves in them, and empowers them in the Christian life. Paul asks this question in such a way that the answer should be obvious. Of course there has been evidence of Christ at work in and among the Corinthians—this is the very proof Paul offers in 2 Cor. 3 as evidence of his apostleship. The Corinthians are his letter, his proof that his ministry is

authentic. Paul adds a note of irony to this thought when he says, “unless indeed you fail the test.” Paul is hopeful throughout this letter that the Corinthians will respond favorably, and so the thought of them “failing the test” is not a likely outcome. Nevertheless Paul adds incentive to the self-examination process.

In 13:6 Paul asks the Corinthians to look at him under the same microscope. The second “test” is to be applied to Paul’s role as an apostle and their “father.” As they search the heart of God Paul is hopeful that the same display of God’s power among them will be evident in his own ministry. Paul writes that his trust is that ultimately he will stand approved by them. If the Corinthians examine themselves and affirm that Christ is in them, the logical conclusion is that God is in Paul too. Paul’s ministry, through which they were first introduced to Christ, will withstand the accusations and criticisms that have been levied against it. An authentic ministry undergirds Paul’s authority in teaching them and encouraging them in their behavioral choices. Previously Paul wrote that his heart is opened wide to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 6:11). Paul has submitted himself to be examined by them and he holds nothing back. He now asks the same of this beloved congregation with the expectation that they will do so with a rigorous honesty that will allow the strained relationship between apostle and congregation to be repaired prior to his next visit to them. These are relevant words to us today. Although the Bible is clear regarding the character of those who are in Christian leadership, sometimes subtle expectations creep in that lead us to expect our pastors or elders to act in a certain way, to lead in a certain way, to relate to the church in a certain way. We can be disappointed when our expectations are not met, but Paul’s words apply to us today. We need to first look inward and examine ourselves. What are the origins of our expectations? Do we want our leaders to conform to our desires and demands or are we free to allow God to work through them the way that He intends? It is not to say that we cannot have open and honest conversations with our leaders. Paul is a model of openness to his congregation and he asks the same of them. When we determine that God is at work in the midst of our church and our own lives, we can give God the freedom to express Himself whenever, whatever, and however He wants to do so.

In 2 Cor. 13:7 Paul changes subjects. In the previous verses, the Corinthians were the subject, but in 13:7 Paul and his prayers for the Corinthians are now the main focus. Paul is praying (this verb is in the present tense which suggests that it is a continuous, ongoing prayer of Paul) that the Corinthians do no wrong and that despite the accusations that Paul is not approved or proven that they will make the right decision. The third way in which Paul uses the theme of “testing” in this passage is as applied to himself. If the Corinthians apply the standards that the false apostles have set forth then Paul hopes to fail that test. When Paul writes about “appearing approved” or “appearing unapproved” he is referring to those expectations set forth by the false apostles that left him pale by comparison. Paul has no interest in living up to their idea of what it means to be spiritual, rather his hope is that the Corinthians will choose to heed his instruction what they have known and experienced of him already. Paul then states in 13:8 that he can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth. In all that he has written, Paul is certain that he has spoken the word of truth that has been

handed to him by Christ directly. Throughout this letter Paul makes the claim that he tells the truth, that he speaks the truth (2 Cor. 4:2; 6:7; 7:14; 11:10; 12:6). Now that he comes to his concluding words, he can only step away and trust that the Spirit of God will do His work in the hearts of the Corinthians and convince them of the truth as well.

Earlier in chapter 13 Paul turned the categories of weakness and strength around. He reminds the Corinthians again that all he has endured on their behalf may have the appearance of weakness, but it is the suffering, the willingness to be humble, the refusal to boast, the desire to spend himself on their behalf that has resulted in their strength. As Paul has followed in the footsteps of Christ, he has demonstrated the power that comes out of weakness and that power has been manifested in the lives of the Corinthians. In this Paul rejoices, but he also continues his prayer for the Corinthians. Paul prayed in 13:7 that they might do no wrong, and now in 13:9 he prays that they be made complete. The word “to be made complete” is a word that describes a restoration process. It was originally used to describe the process of a bone being set or a net being mended. Behind the idea of completion is that something broken is being restored to its proper state. In this situation, Paul’s hope is that the brokenness in his relationship with the Corinthians and in their relationship with God would be healed. In 2 Cor. 5:20 Paul urged the Corinthians to “be reconciled to God.” He does so again in slightly different language and behind this prayer is the reminder that soon Paul will be among them himself. The extent to which the Corinthians will go to allow God to restore the situation will determine the tone of Paul’s next visit. In 2 Cor. 13:10, he makes it clear that his ministry is one of edification, of building up the church. If the church refuses to participate in this process, he may need to act in severity. Paul has been accused of being severe in writing yet timid when present. He makes it clear that he will dispel this myth if necessary, but it is his hope that it will not be necessary. As Paul concludes his letter, it is necessary to remember that this would have been read to the congregation in its entirety. As the Corinthians heard the message penned by Paul, they would have felt the passion of his heart, the immediacy of his message, and the reality of Paul’s looming presence.

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

2 Corinthians 13:11-14 comprises Paul’s parting words to this beloved church. After all has been said, Paul makes his final appeal wherein he issues five pointed admonitions (13:11), a greeting (13:12-13), and a benediction (13:14). Paul’s conclusion to 2 Corinthians is typical of how he normally ends his letters, but he does tailor it specifically to the setting in Corinth. In closing, Paul narrows down five areas that he feels need one more mention. In 13:11 he gives five successive commands: rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, and live in peace. It is important to notice that he prefaces these commands with a term of endearment as he calls this church “brethren.” Paul’s first command to rejoice should be seen as both an encouragement and somewhat of a warning. Although there is a note of sternness to Paul’s words, he is confident that the Corinthians will do the right thing and that when he does come to visit them they will be able to rejoice in Paul and he will be able to rejoice in them. The command to rejoice however puts the emphasis on the fact that the

Corinthians do need to respond. The second command to be made complete repeats the prayer of 13:9. In this church that is characterized by factions, strife, erroneous beliefs, and questionable behavior, Paul encourages them to be restored in every area of their spiritual lives. The third command to be comforted harkens back to the first chapter of 2 Corinthians where Paul goes into great detail regarding the nature of suffering, the comfort God brings, and the privilege the believer has to share the comfort which is received by God. The word “comfort” can also be translated as “encourage.” In this instance, Paul commands the Corinthians to be comforted, be encouraged by his ministry, by the ministry of Christ, and by the fact that Paul continues to care for them as a father does for his own child. Next, Paul commands them to be like-minded—a necessary quality if there is to be restoration, rejoicing, and encouragement. There has been much division within the church and Paul knows that for the gospel to move forward the church has to be unified. Through the difficult process of self-evaluation, it is the apostle’s hope that the unnecessary things will fall away and the truth of the gospel will be the central guiding principle of this church. Finally, Paul admonishes them to live in peace. If they can put their differences and their prejudices aside, the Corinthians will be able to be like-minded about what matters and peaceful relationships will flow from an honest query into the heart of God. The culmination of following the commands that Paul delivers is that the God of love and peace will be with them. Although Paul makes frequent reference to the God of peace in his letters, this is the only place he uses the phrase “the God of love.” The Corinthians certainly need to experience the peace of God in their relationships and in their lives, but they also are in need of correctly understanding and expressing the love of God. Paul wrote extensively in 1 Cor. 13 defining love both negatively and positively because the Corinthians were more enthralled with displays of the Spirit than with loving one another. In this blessing Paul focuses on the abiding qualities of love that should underscore all of their interactions and hopefully guide them in their response toward Paul.

In 2 Cor. 13:12, Paul gives yet one more command, which is to greet one another with a holy kiss. Although prevalent in the culture, this was not a common element in synagogue worship. Most commentators believe that the “holy kiss” was a uniquely Christian expression. The kiss was likely delivered to the cheek and meant to be an expression of fellowship, inclusion as a family, and acceptance of one another. It became a regular part of the worship service in the early church. Paul also commands his church members to greet one another with a holy kiss in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, and 1 Thessalonians 5:26. Along with his command to greet one another, Paul sends greetings to the Corinthians likely from the churches of Macedonia. Paul writes “all the saints greet you” and since Paul was in Macedonia when he wrote 2 Corinthians it would follow that he is referring to the believers in Macedonia.

Paul finally concludes with the words of benediction in 13:14 “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” What more can be said? Paul appeals in this passage to the three persons of the Trinity as they are involved in the believer’s life. He begins first with the person of Christ and the grace that is bestowed upon us as we begin to grasp the gracious gift of the cross and what it offers to all mankind. It is through Christ’s death on the cross that we

then are introduced to the love of God the Father. Christ's role on earth was to explain the Father and He continues to do that in our lives. As a result of our relationship to Christ's work on the cross and the Father's love, the Spirit is poured out in our lives. In this case Paul focuses on the fellowship of the Holy Spirit in which He acts to unite believers in their faith. Paul concludes by blessing his congregation with the gracious gifts that belong to the believer. It is Paul's ultimate hope that when he returns to Corinth that grace, love, and fellowship will prevail.

So, how did the Corinthians respond? Was Paul's ministry a success? What we know of Paul's later ministry to Corinth is that soon after sending this letter he did spend three months in Corinth (Acts 20:2-3). He stayed in Corinth until a plot was formed against him by the Jews. We also know that the collection for Jerusalem was completed (a major topic in chapters 8 and 9). Additionally, the letter to the Romans was written from Corinth and there is no mention of strife or contentions. These three references lead us to believe that Paul's letter to the church of Corinth was well-received and that he had a joyous reception upon his return visit.

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Read 2 Corinthians 13:5-10

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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? ⁶ But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test. ⁷ Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear unapproved. ⁸ For we can do nothing against the truth, but *only* for the truth. ⁹ For we rejoice when we ourselves are weak but you are strong; this we also pray for, that you be made complete. 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.

1. In 13:5 Paul commands the Corinthians to test themselves, to examine themselves to see if Jesus Christ is in them. Do you think this is a fair command?

2. If you were asked to examine yourself in a similar manner, what would you recognize in your life as evidence of Christ in you?

3. In 13:7 Paul prays that the Corinthians will do what is right. Based on what you know of this letter, what do you think he is asking?

4. In 13:9 Paul also prays for completion and restoration. What do you think this reveals about Paul's heart? How do you think it encourages us as believers to respond to church leadership in general?

Read 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

¹¹ Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy

kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you. ¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

5. Paul's final words to the Corinthians are "rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, and live in peace." Do you think these admonitions are appropriate to our own church body? If so, how? If not, are there other admonitions you think would be more appropriate?

6. Grace, love, and fellowship are three characteristics of God (as expressed in the Son, Father, and Spirit). Do you feel like grace, love, and fellowship permeate our church body? If yes, give thanks. If no, what do you think you could do to help foster this kind of environment?

7. What has impacted you or impressed you the most from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians?