

Building up God's Church

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 July 2022

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 0 0] Now I'm fearing that I might be triggering some of you by saying this, but I'll do it anyway. But some of you young ones might know of a time when dad and mom have gone away for a while and they leave you in charge of the house.

And now they're soon coming home. It may be a phone call back to you or an email or a text message, but the instructions are clear.

Now, they want to make sure that you're prepared for their return. The house has to be in order.

Things need to be packed away. The kitchen, it has not been cleaned for the last three weeks, needs to be cleaned. Make sure when dad and mom comes home, the message goes, that we don't find the house in a mess or else dot dot dot.

Now, when we get to the final section of this letter, it's quite clear, isn't it, that Paul's return visit, the third visit to Corinth is imminent.

[1 : 1 3] And you'll find a couple of references, maybe three references to that in the entire passage. It is in the back of his mind as he gives these last instructions. He's coming and he would like the Corinthians to be prepared.

Now, some of what he once done has already been covered in earlier in the letter, particularly regarding the collection for the Jews in Jerusalem. But now he focuses on the Corinthians on affairs, their conduct.

And we're left with no doubt as to his motivations. It's to build up the church. So we have the key verse at the end of chapter 13 and verse 10, which is on the next slide, I hope.

Yes. This is why I write these things when I'm 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.

Now, the passage I've broken up today into two sections. In the first, Paul tells them what will transpire when he finally arrives.

[2 : 2 1] That's the first section. And in the second, he then says, in light of this, I'm encouraging you to do this or that in order to prepare. And so let's begin then with what the Corinthians are to expect when he finally arrives.

So verse 11, chapter 12, where Jillian started reading, he says, I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I'm not in the least inferior to the super apostles, even though I am nothing.

I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders, and miracles. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you?

Forgive me this wrong. Now, Paul here is again continuing, if you've been following along, the theme of playing the fool. And as we saw probably two or three weeks ago now, he again defends his reason for not accepting their hospitality.

Except this time, Paul gives us another reason. Or he actually says that I will continue to refuse this hospitality, even when I come for a third time.

[3 : 31] And the reason he gives as follows. Now I'm 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? Now you see, the Corinthians may have been looking to Paul like a friend or a guru, which in those times, as a teacher, they had to pay homage to and give things to.

But as an apostle, Paul sees the relationship more like a parent to a child. And as we all know, the way it works is that parents provide for their children.

Now in case some of you young ones think that you can quote this verse back to your parents at some stage in their lives, Paul here has in mind little children. The relationship of parents to little children, not so much grown-ups with their elderly parents, for which we should be caring for them.

[4 : 41] But when they're little children, right, parents provide for them, not the other way around, isn't it? In fact, we've seen problems, haven't we, that when parents place their own needs as burdens on their children, more so in terms of emotional or psychological needs.

It's not good, is it? Because many children find themselves living up to those expectations, unable to do so, and suffocating as a result.

Likewise, Paul sees clearly that this is his role as an apostle to the Corinthians, to build them up. He's not asking for them to provide for him, therefore he's not after their possessions, nor does he wish to place any burdens on them, but it's the other way around.

He doesn't place any burdens except, as we will soon see, the burden that God himself places on them, which is that of living holy and righteous lives.

We'll get to that in a moment, but before we do, Paul here again answers one more possible accusation that even though on the surface he has not profited from his relationship with them, yet he might have secretly done so, and that's the accusation that he wants to refute.

[6 : 04] Paul says in verse 16 that this simply isn't true. Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you, yet crafty fellow that I am, I court you by trickery.

That's not him speaking, that's sarcasm again. He's almost mimicking what others may be saying of him, that he's tricky, and how he's done it is by sending Titus ahead of him to exploit them.

So verse 17, Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? I urged Titus to go to you, yes, and I sent our brother with him. Now if you remember back in chapter 8, Titus was being sent to help them arrange the collection for the Jews in Jerusalem.

And this other brother was also mentioned that Paul has sent, and this brother is trusted by all the churches. And so it appears that what this brother is doing is to keep Titus accountable as someone who is trustworthy.

And so he goes on, So Titus did not exploit you, did he? No, he did not. Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit? Yes, we did. Everything that we have done is clear and transparent.

[7 : 14] It has been accounted for. And you can see, and by this brother accounting for it, that Paul has not profited from the collection personally. But as I said earlier, although Paul didn't burden himself on the Corinthians, it doesn't mean that he had placed no demands on them.

Rather, as an apostle, Paul placed on them the demands that had the aim of strengthening them. And in particular, there were the demands of godliness.

And so Paul wants them to attend to these before he arrives. And so he continues in verse 19. 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.

That is, I will be harsher than you would like me. I fear that there will be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder.

[8 : 23] 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 endowed.

Paul is afraid, isn't he, that when he gets to Corinth, he'll find that the sin that he's pointed out, and he's already pointed that out earlier in the letter, has not been taken care of.

That the discipline he's called for in the letter hasn't occurred. With the ones still in sexual sin or debauchery unrepentant. And for the rest of the church, divided over what to do with them.

That's why there's discord. Well, like a loving father, Paul doesn't shy away from discipline. And as the other reading in Proverbs went, the Lord says this, Do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves.

As a father, the son he delights in. So you see, godly discipline is an act of love. Because even though it's hard, its aim is to build up.

[9 : 40] To build us up. To build the church up. Not to tear us down. Which is what sin does, actually. And so if they really wanted to build up the church, Paul says, they ought to discipline those who have sinned.

It's ultimately a loving act for them to be doing. And it's for their good, as well as for the good of the church in general. And I suppose it's no different for us today, is it?

We often find the idea of discipline hard, don't we? And sometimes, in the context of a church, we can't see how it fits with grace. And particularly when imperfect leaders try to discipline others, it can come across like hypocrisy, can't it?

And so, even though it does have to be done thoughtfully and graciously, yes, we ought to do it that way, discipline is important in the church, isn't it?

And I think we can see how Paul himself here does it, can't we, as we read his letter. So, yes, he wants to see godliness and righteousness in the church, but he doesn't come in with all guns blazing, does he?

[10 : 50] He tries hard not to be heavy-handed. But rather, he warns them, right? He gives them a chance for them to exercise self-discipline, to repent individually and collectively.

He wants them to do it, rather than for him to then come and punish them for not repenting. And so, he explains to them in verse 1 of chapter 13, This will be my third visit to you.

Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. So, he's saying, consider that my first witness.

I now repeat it while I'm absent. So, this is my second witness. And then the third, On my return, I will not spare those who sin earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me.

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 in our dealing with you.

[12 : 03] You see how then he warns before he disciplines, doesn't he? But then he says, don't take that as a sign of weakness. It doesn't mean that I just keep warning you that I will not eventually act.

And he says, look, look at God and look at his son Jesus. Because when Jesus came, he did the very same thing. He firstly preached a gospel of repentance. He asked people to turn back to God willingly.

And then, even before judgment came, Jesus laid down his life for us and for our sins. And so Paul says he was crucified in weakness first.

But God raised him up in power. His resurrection was a vindication of his message. And then now comes the warning of the Lord's judgment, doesn't it?

If we refuse to repent. And so Paul likewise follows in the method of the Lord Jesus. He too preaches a message of repentance first. But don't mistake that for weakness, Paul says.

[13 : 05] Because when he finally arrives, he will not be afraid to use the Lord's authority to punish unrepentant sin. And so in light of this warning, what does Paul encourage them to do?

Verse 5. He says, 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 so that people will see that we have stood the test. But so that you will do what is right, even though we may have seemed to fail.

For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak, but you are strong. And our prayer is that you may be fully restored.

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, and not for tearing you down.

[14 : 09] So Paul here again is not concerned for his own reputation, but that the Corinthians be built up. Hence, he says that even if it seems like they have failed, Paul has failed, and not lived up to what a successful apostle looks like, his primary concern really is to see that the Corinthians themselves have passed or stood the test.

Therefore, the instruction is for them to examine themselves. And here he is not saying measure themselves against the world, but examine themselves to see that they are in the faith.

And of course, the most immediate test of that faith is all that Paul has just said, their obedience, that accompanies their confession of the gospel of Christ. That is their purity, their holiness, everything that they have not done to date.

Now, Paul isn't talking here again about sinless perfection, because that's not what the gospel is about, is it? We're in God's kingdom by grace. But, if as a result of our faith, Christ is in us, then our lives need to reflect that as well, doesn't it?

So, this examination of ourselves is partly inward, that is checking our motives and thoughts and motivation, but ultimately, it doesn't just stop at introspection, does it?

[15 : 32] It needs to be expressed outwardly, in right living and obedience. That's what gives expression to our faith in Christ. Examine, therefore, how we live, that our actions and our words are consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And Paul says that we are to do that individually, but also then express it in terms of our community, as a church. So, Paul ends in verse 11 to 14.

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice, strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss, all God's people here send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Now, it's interesting to note that Paul says, strive for full restoration, because, unfortunately, it's not always possible, is it? Full restoration requires that every member is willing to be repentant, to be living in peace, and that's not always the case, is it?

[16 : 47] It only takes one to say no, and we can't get to that ideal. But Paul says that even though that's not always possible, we mustn't give up on this ideal, but rather keep encouraging each other to live for Christ, where there is conflict, to reconcile, and to keep the unity of the peace.

We are to keep drawing one another back to the gospel and just encouraging us to look past petty differences and past grievances.

Nowadays, we don't greet each other with a holy kiss, although you can if you want, but in this pandemic, probably the elbow bump is the way to go. But whatever the physical expression of peace, that's not the point, is it?

What it is, is it ultimately symbolizes that we are in fellowship with one another. That's the more important thing. That we're loving each other just as God loved us, and that we're showing grace to each other just as Christ has showed us.

Now, this has been a hard letter from Paul, hasn't it, if you've been following along. There's a lot of things that have been going on in Corinth and for a long while. And some of it, I think, when Paul has to write and think and consider them, must have been really discouraging for him.

[18 : 04] And yet, we find, don't we, right at the end of his letter, a rather positive note, doesn't he? He is still hopeful of restoration. He still encourages them to rejoice.

Now, how could he do that? How could he still be so positive? Well, if you look around the church, filled with humans that are weak and fallible, even in our church, often there's not really a lot to rejoice in, is there?

And so I don't think Paul is rejoicing in that sort of thing, nor is he asking us to rejoice in sin, as he found them, sexual sin and debauchery or discord or gossip.

I don't think that's where Paul is looking for his joy and his encouragement. No. Rather, I think it's even in the midst of a flawed church, Paul could look to Christ, and that's what he encourages them to do, to take comfort in the gospel and in what the gospel has already achieved.

For in the end, and this is what happens when God has already achieved all he has in Christ, for in the end, God's church will keep growing.

[19 : 20] It will prevail. It will be built up. It will be established forever. Why? Because of the love of God.

Because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, shown to us already on the cross. And the fellowship, which actually means the partnership of the Holy Spirit working among us.

God is the one who is going to establish and strengthen his church because of what he's already achieved in Christ Jesus. And so thank God that he's in control of that situation, isn't he?

Thank God that he cares more for us as a church than we do. And that is what will sustain us as his people. So each time we close the service by saying this grace, and we don't do it every week, but we do it often enough, I think it's good to remember, actually, the context for it.

Paul actually gave it to us and to the church in Corinth at the close of this letter to a church that was not the model church by any means.

[20 : 32] It was actually a very flawed church, isn't it? Lots of problems. And so if there was hope for the Corinthians, surely there's hope for us as well.

God's power is at work among us. And his power is not seen in the strength of our numbers or how polished we are or how successful we look.

Rather, it's at work in our obedience to him. The simple things of purity and holiness. That's God's work of living in peace with each other, encouraging each other, restoring those who have fallen, reconciling when we're in conflict.

All these, if you look at them, they seem like small things in many ways, isn't it? But really, they're actually big things in God's plan for us.

And it is in and through these things that God will build and establish us as his church. And we ought to take great encouragement from that and then persist in them, persevere in them, because that is God's work, as the title says, God's power and work in our human weakness.

[21 : 50] Let's pray. Father, thank you that you love us, that you sent your son to die for us, and by grace, we are restored with you. Help us by your spirit to live obedient lives and to live in peace with one another.

Help us to pass the test of faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.