

2 Corinthians 12:14-13:14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians 12-14-13 Here for the third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours, but you.

For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him.

Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.

For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish. That perhaps there may be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

[1 : 06] I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier, and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practised.

This is the third time that I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. I warn those who sinned before, and all the others, and I warn them now, while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them, since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you fail to meet the test?

I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. But we pray to God that you may not do wrong, not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.

[2 : 19] For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak, and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come, I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me, for building up, and not for tearing down.

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration. Comfort one another. Agree with one another. Live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. In the second half of 2 Corinthians chapter 12, and the final chapter of the epistle, Paul speaks of his third visit to Corinth again.

His first visit was the one narrated in Acts chapter 18. The second was the painful visit he wrote of earlier in this epistle. Continuing from his statement in verse 13, about his imagined wronging of the Corinthians in not taking support from them, not granting them the honour of being his patrons, Paul expresses his determination to continue that policy of not taking support in his forthcoming visit.

What Paul wants is not the Corinthians' resources, but the Corinthians themselves, their joyful response to his teaching and fellowship with them in the gospel. He is their father in the faith, and it is not the task of offspring to store up support and inheritance for their parents, but vice versa.

[3 : 54] Paul is clearly not averse to asking for resources from the Corinthians, but not for himself. Rather, he requests them for the Jerusalem collection. Paul's self-giving service of the Corinthians is entirely willing and not grudging.

It proceeds from his love for them. Which is why the strange notion that the super-apostles have given the Corinthians that Paul loves them less because he doesn't take support from them, is so bewildering to Paul.

As he has earlier expressed in this letter, Paul is dismayed by the fact that his love for the Corinthians is not truly requited. In fact, it seems as if a really shameful accusation has been made, a claim that the Jerusalem collection is a duplicitous ruse to take money from the Corinthians, without doing so directly.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the fact that other associates of his were involved in organising the collection. If Paul were defrauding them, these parties must presumably be in on the scheme.

Yet Titus, for whom the Corinthians seem to have some genuine affection, and the other parties all behave themselves in the same scrupulously consistent and transparent fashion. At this point, Paul steps back from his argument.

[5 : 02] He wishes to address a potential misconception. It might appear to some that his epistle is largely an attempt on Paul's part to defend himself, an epistle driven by his own personal interests.

However, Paul's authority has never been an end in itself, as if Paul were chiefly concerned about some status that he personally enjoyed on account of it. No, Paul's authority exists for the purpose of their protection and edification.

These are the things that have concerned Paul throughout. Paul's worry is that when he comes to them, he may find that they have not set things in order, and that he will have another painful and tense visit, with lingering hostilities from some of the Corinthians towards him, and another visit in which he will have to cause the Corinthians grief by sharp rebuke.

It seems as if Paul has gotten wind of the fact that some of the issues that he addressed in Corinth in 1 Corinthians are still causing problems there, and that some of those who were originally causing the problems haven't repented.

If matters of sexual immorality are still causing issues in Corinth, Paul's use of the illustration of a father jealously protecting his betrothed daughter from seduction at the beginning of chapter 11 might well have been a more apt one than we might have originally supposed.

[6 : 15] Preparing the Corinthians for his third visit, Paul refers to the ways that matters of contention must be resolved, with the evidence provided by two or three witnesses.

There are various ways that the witnesses to which Paul refers might be understood. Some take them to refer to literal witnesses that Paul would summon when he deals with matters more formally upon his return to them.

For others, the witnesses are the visits themselves. Yet others see the witnesses as referring to the warnings that he has given to them, in person and by letter. Behind Paul's statement here we might hear Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 18, verses 15-17.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. The logic of two or three witnesses may be at work in Matthew 18's instructions, not only in the accompanying parties in the second confrontation, but also in the two or three confrontations of the sinning brother taken together.

[7 : 33] The bringing of witnesses does suggest a more formal procedure that Paul is going to adopt. Matters have escalated. Perhaps Timothy and Titus will speak in Paul's defence.

Paul gives his warning that when he comes, he won't spare the impenitent. Like those condemned by Matthew 18, they will presumably be removed from fellowship. Some of the Corinthians have sought from Paul a demonstration or proof that Christ is speaking in him.

They want to test the veracity of his claimed authority. Paul treats this less as a questioning of himself, but as a questioning of Christ. Christ has been powerful among them, and the Corinthians should be well aware of this.

Paul relates what he has been saying to the weakness and power connection to which he has often returned in the letter. Christ's own identity was marked by this connection between weakness and power, and it is Christ who both must be determinative for the way that we think about power more generally, and must be the one in whom we situate ourselves.

Those who think about power in earthly ways will find it difficult to understand the Christ-shaped ministry of Paul and his associates. The Corinthians have been looking for proof from Paul, but Paul turns things around on them.

[8 : 47] The proof of Paul's ministry, as seen in chapter 3 verses 1 to 3, is the Corinthians themselves. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

If the Corinthians are testing Paul, they should turn the spotlight around on themselves. The evidence of the authority of Christ at work in and through Paul is the Corinthians themselves.

If they are looking for proof, then they should look at themselves. The question that they must answer is, Is Jesus Christ in you? Paul words the question in a way that presumes a positive answer.

For all their faults and failings, Christ is indeed among them. Whatever unsettling aspects of evidence that throw that judgment into temporary shadow. If Christ is indeed working among them, then there is evidence of Christ at work in and through Paul.

[9 : 56] Once again, Paul's concern here is not self-justification and self-defense, but the building up of the Corinthians in the truth and in the path of righteousness. Paul is much less concerned with his own apostolic reputation than he is with the Corinthians' well-being, the health of his children in the faith.

Paul is not spoiling for a fight with the Corinthians, or looking for an opportunity to flex his apostolic authority. Rather, he is very glad to appear weak if they are strong in the faith.

As a good father, he does not rejoice in bringing punishment and rebuke. He is entirely uninvested in proving himself tough when it is not in the service of building up his children.

It is for this reason that he is writing to them now in such a manner, to avoid a situation where he has to employ a more forceful authority with them. What he is praying for is their restoration.

His authority was given for the sake of building up, not for tearing down, a point he has already made in chapter 10 verse 8. While there may be occasions when tearing down is required, this is not the ordinary intended use of his authority, so he will do whatever he can to avoid the unnecessary employment of it in such a fashion.

[11 : 09] In Paul's final admonitions to the Corinthians, we might get a sense of those things that he deems most needful for them at this present juncture in time. He wants them to seek to restore things, their appropriate conduct and their relationship with him.

He wants them to be comforted, something that will be achieved as restoration occurs. They should put an end to conflict and dissension, and they should be at peace. God is the God of love and peace, and these are behaviours characteristic of his presence among us.

As he often tells the recipients of his letters, Paul charges the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss, as an expression of the holy unity and peace that we enjoy in Christ.

He conveys the greetings of other saints to them, which would serve to remind them of the fact that there is a wider body of people, of Christians, attending to the matters between Paul and them, and that for the sake of bringing glory to God through their thanksgiving on the Corinthians account, they should respond appropriately.

Finally, Paul gives a threefold Trinitarian blessing to the Corinthians. Each person of the Trinity is associated with a particular blessing. Grace with the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, love with God the Father, and fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

[12 : 26] We can best understand this with what some theologians have termed the doctrine of appropriation. God's works are indivisible. All of God does all that God does. The Trinity isn't a division of labour.

Nor is the grace of the Son a grace that is not at the same time a grace from the Father to us, or the grace communicated to us by the Spirit. The same can be said of the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

It is through the Son that the love of the Father is made manifest, and it is the Spirit by whom that love is poured out and personally present in our hearts. The fellowship of the Spirit is, according to 1 John 1, verse 3, a fellowship that we enjoy with the Father and the Son.

The doctrine of appropriation offers a fuller account of how each person of the Trinity can possess in a unique manner what is the common property of all. According to this approach, for instance, by recognising the order of the Trinity, names, qualities or works can be especially attributed to one person, albeit not to the exclusion of the others.

So while fellowship may be something wrought by all of the persons of the Trinity, it is most fittingly associated with the Spirit. A question to consider.

[13 : 43] How might taking Christ as our model for power change the way that we regard and exercise it?