

Signs of a True Apostle

2 Corinthians 12:11–18

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Introduction

Well we return again to our study of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, so turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 12. We find ourselves in the middle of a section of Paul's letter—specifically, chapters 10 to 13—where Paul is directly engaging both the false apostles who were opposing him and undermining his reputation in Corinth, and a sub-section of the Corinthian church who, unlike the majority of the church, had remained duped by the false apostles' lies and so remained suspicious of Paul's integrity and his genuine apostleship.

These false apostles have thrown out every accusation they can think of in order to undermine the Corinthians' confidence in the Apostle Paul. He wasn't a skilled public speaker. He didn't draw a sufficient-sized crowd or command significant enough speaking fees. He wasn't one of the original twelve apostles from Jerusalem, and he had no letters of commendation from the Jerusalem church. He changed his mind so often with regard to his travel plans that it was obvious he was a fleshly man, driven by his own impulses and devoid of the Spirit of God.

And chief above all: this man suffered way too much to be a genuine servant of Christ. As we've said a number of times, these false teachers—in addition to being Judaizing legalists—were also triumphalists. They had this conception that the Christian life and the Christian ministry were to be marked by uninterrupted outward successes—that since Jesus was enthroned as King over creation, His servants should be ruling alongside Him in manifest victory. They were prosperity preachers! Health-and-wealth peddlers! And so if you weren't an eloquent orator, who could command large crowds and even larger speaking fees, if you didn't operate with ostentatious displays of how favored you were, and if you experienced the kind of conflict, opposition, and suffering that Paul faced, you couldn't possibly be blessed of God.

And the Corinthians liked how that sounded. “Is there a way that we can have our sins forgiven, while at the same time being well-received and celebrated by the world? Can we serve Jesus, and at the same time avoid all the weakness and difficulty that marked Jesus' ministry and now marks Paul's ministry? Crown without a cross? Hey, I'll sign up for that!” And so they became enamored with the false apostles' triumphalist version of Christianity. And they were especially infatuated with all the boastful claims these phonies made for themselves.

And so Paul has set about the task to win them back. In the first seven chapters of the Book, he laid out his case for the majority of the church who had repented from this Gospel-denying

triumphalism during Titus's most recent visit. But there was still an obstinate minority who remained deceived by the flashiness and fleshliness of the false apostles, and reluctant to put their confidence in Paul and in the Gospel Paul preached. And so chapters 10 to 13 represent Paul's appeal to that recalcitrant minority to have done with the false apostles once and for all. And so he takes the gloves off, as it were, and unmasks these charlatans for the frauds that they were. They're nothing but servants of Satan, masquerading as apostles of Christ, adulterously wooing the Corinthians away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ alone.

And a significant part of Paul's strategy for winning back this unrepentant minority has been to wear a mask of his own. The false teachers were masquerading as apostles. But in chapter 11 verse 16 to chapter 12 verse 10, Paul decides to don the mask of a boastful fool. He decides that if the Corinthians were smitten by the foolish boasting of arrogant triumphalists, he'd do a little boasting of his own. And so even though he's disgusted to engage in any kind of boasting, he decides to answer the fool according to his folly, in the hope that he can shake his dear spiritual children free from the stupor they had fallen into.

But he doesn't boast like they do. He turns the false apostles' foolish boasting on its head by boasting not about his strengths and successes, but about his sufferings and his weaknesses. That is what actually marks the genuine, faithful servant of Christ: not uninterrupted success and the fawning adulation of the world, but, as he says in chapter 12 verse 10, weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties. Genuine Christian service isn't certified by the absence of conflict; it is certified by enduring such conflict without turning aside from faithfulness to the Gospel that Christ has sent us to preach. God is pleased to bring his servants through harrowing difficulties—from beatings, to stonings, to shipwrecks, to thorns in the flesh delivered by Satan—so that He can magnify the glory of His own strength and power against the backdrop of human weakness. Spiritual power is not displayed in ostentatious displays of outward triumph, no. Spiritual power, verse 9, is perfected in *weakness*. It is when we are *weak*, then we are strong, verse 10.

And that's the note upon which Paul concludes The Fool's Speech. A ministry founded upon boasting is utterly foolish, entirely incongruent with the pattern of Jesus' own ministry which culminated in the greatest suffering of the cross, and entirely inconsistent with how God means to glorify the power of Christ in this age. And that brings us to our passage this morning, where Paul picks up after The Fool's Speech by appealing to the Corinthians to properly discern his genuine apostleship. Let's read our text together. 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 11 to 18. "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. ¹²The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. ¹³For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong! ¹⁴Here

for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? ¹⁶But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. ¹⁷Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? ¹⁸I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?"

And as you read that paragraph you can discern some of the other accusations that were being made by the false apostles and that were being entertained by the Corinthians. There was this notion that Paul was inferior to these triumphalist super-apostles—particularly with respect to the working of miracles and the like. And there was the notion that Paul did not love Corinthians, particularly because of his refusal to receive financial support for them while he was with them. And so in this passage, Paul responds to those accusations, and in the process provides **two authenticating marks** of his apostleship—two broad characteristics that certify his genuineness as a servant of Christ, and, by implication, that certify the genuineness of all who would endeavor to serve Christ and His church.

I. The Genuine Signs (vv. 11–12)

And the **first** of those **authenticating marks** of Paul's apostleship is, number one, that he had exhibited the **genuine signs** of a true servant of Christ. And we see this in verses 11 and 12. Paul writes, "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to [these super-apostles], even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles."

He begins here with a disgusted epilogue to The Fool's Speech. "I have become foolish; you yourselves have compelled me." "You have driven me to engage in what I know to be utterly foolish and what I find to be extremely distasteful." And the New American Standard has the next sentence beginning with the word "Actually." That's actually quite a free paraphrase. The original just literally reads, "You yourselves have compelled me, *for* I should have been commended by you." I was compelled to engage in this foolish boasting like I have, *because* you—who should have commended me as your apostle, as your father in the Gospel, you who are yourselves my letter of commendation (chapter 3 verse 2), you who are yourselves the very seal of my apostleship in the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1–2)—instead of defending the integrity of my life and ministry against these false accusations, you considered me inferior to these boastful triumphalists! And so I had no choice but to wear the mask of a fool so I could show you how foolish those imposters really are, and how foolish you've been for being taken in by them."

They knew Paul! He had lived among them for eighteen months! They had observed his character. They had tested his message. Their own conversion to Christ was the evidence that Paul preached the one and only saving Gospel. And not only that, as we'll see in a moment, but they had observed God's own testimony and attestation to the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship, as they saw him perform the miraculous signs that marked a true apostle. Paul was, as he says in verse 11, in no respect inferior to these super-apostles. And so the Corinthians therefore had no reason to sit sheepishly in silence while these invaders leveled slanderous accusations against him.

And just a brief word of application is in order here. Charles Hodge puts it well. He says, "It is an imperative duty, resting on all who have the opportunity, to vindicate the righteous. For us to sit silent when aspersions are cast upon good men, or when their character and services are undervalued, is to make ourselves partakers of the guilt of detraction" (666). Now, that doesn't mean that we have to start a Twitter debate with every kook on the internet who has something bad to say about your spiritual heroes. But it does mean that if people ever invaded this church like the false apostles invaded Corinth and started bad-mouthing your pastors and elders, that you have a duty to silence those people by vindicating the character and the ministry of the men you know to have labored over you with integrity. Look at all the mischief that plagued the church in Corinth because there was no courageous voice to nip that triumphalistic nonsense in the bud at the first moment the false apostles tried to undermine Paul's character.

And so Paul says, "In no respect was I inferior to these super-apostles," verse 11, "even though I am a nobody." And he has to add this qualification. Even the true statement that he was not in any way inferior to the false apostles brushes too close to boasting, that he's embarrassed by it and quickly has to speak of his own unworthiness. And there's great wordplay going on in the original that doesn't quite come through in the English translation. The Greek word for the phrase "in no respect" is the exact same word that gets translated "nobody" at the end of the verse. You could translate it, "In *nothing* was I inferior, even though I am *nothing*."

And this wasn't controversial for Paul. He knew he was nothing! 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants [Paul] nor the one who waters [Apollos] is *anything*, but God who causes the growth." 2 Corinthians 4:7: He knew that he was nothing but an earthen vessel, an unremarkable, easily-replaceable clay pot. But this wasn't just the false humility of self-deprecation. He is at the same time nothing, and *in* nothing inferior to the super-apostles. He expressed this same principle in chapter 3 verse 5, where he said, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate." In himself, he was nothing. "The least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle," 1 Corinthians 15. But by

the grace of God he was what he was, and therefore was not the least bit outdone by the intruding false teachers.

Because, verse 12, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.” The Corinthians were enamored with the super-apostles’ flashy displays of power and their fanciful tales of supernatural mystical experiences, while all Paul had to show them were scars from whips and bruises from rods. But Paul responds here that the signs of a true apostle were indeed performed among them. And note the passive voice, there. Paul doesn’t say, “*I performed* the signs of a true apostle among you.” He says, “The signs of a true apostle *were performed* among you.” He’s emphasizing, every way he can, that he is nothing and that the grace of God working in him and with him is everything. He says that very thing in Romans 15:18: “For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.”

So what are these “signs of a true apostle” that the Corinthians had observed in Paul’s ministry among them? Well, he speaks of “signs, wonders, and miracles.” And the distinction between these three isn’t to be pressed too far. Commentators agree that Paul isn’t referring to three distinct types of miracles, but to miraculous signs in general, though considered from three different perspectives. They are *signs* because they serve as authentications of apostolic authority; they are *wonders* because they arouse awe and astonishment in those who witness them; and they are *miracles*—or, literally, *powers*; that is, works of power—because they display God’s power at work in more remarkable ways than normal. So the point is: Paul had worked miracles among the Corinthians. He said to them in 1 Corinthians 2:4, that when he first came to them with the Gospel, “my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but *in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*”

And this wasn’t unique to his ministry in Corinth. Because he was a genuine apostle sent from the Lord Jesus Christ, he was endowed with the supernatural ability to perform miracles. In Acts 14:8–10, in Lystra, Paul commanded a man who had been lame from birth, “Stand upright on your feet.” And the text says, “He leaped up and began to walk.” Acts 16:18 records for us the time Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl in Philippi. Acts 19:11–12 speaks of Paul’s ministry in Asia Minor. It says, “God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.” And in Acts 14:3 we get something of a summary statement of Paul’s miracle-working ministry, when Luke says of Paul and his companions: the Lord “was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands.”

And it’s that reality of *attestation*—that the Lord Jesus Himself was *testifying* to the authenticity of the word of His grace that Paul was preaching by granting them the ability to perform these miracles—that’s really significant. You have to remember: in the time in which Paul is

ministering, the New Testament is still being written. God's revelation had not yet been complete. And so in a time when anyone could just show up and make spectacular claims for themselves and for their teaching, criteria for authentication were of paramount importance. In our day, we evaluate men and ministries by the full counsel of divine revelation as delivered to us in Scripture. But before that revelation had been completed, God authenticated the ministries of His servants through revelatory miracles like these.

The writer of Hebrews says this very thing in Hebrews 2, verses 3 and 4. He says, "After [the Gospel] was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard." How was that? How was it confirmed? Verse 4: "*God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.*" The miracles of the apostles were God's own testimony to the genuineness of their message. And Paul tells the Corinthians: "You witnessed these very signs of an apostle when I was with you! God Himself testified to you of the authenticity of my apostleship!"

But we must note that the working of such miracles was not an infallible test of apostleship. After all, miracles can be counterfeited. In 2 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul describes the Antichrist as "the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and *false* wonders." Jesus Himself predicts, in Mark 13:22, that "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if [it were] possible, the elect." In fact, it's almost certain that the false apostles were able to produce these kinds of false miracles as well. After all, they boasted in outward displays of power; if they had none to speak of, Paul's argument would have been much simpler: "I do miracles and they don't!"

So how were the Corinthians to distinguish between Paul's **genuine signs** and the intruders' false signs? Well, look at verse 12 again. Paul doesn't speak only of the signs, wonders, and miracles. He says, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you *with all perseverance.*" You could also translate that final phrase: "in utmost endurance." And here Paul strikes at the heart of the contrast between him and the false apostles. Their "signs" were nothing more than counterfeit triumphalist showmanship. But Paul's miracles were performed in the context of great endurance in the face of opposition and conflict. Their ministry occasioned no opposition from the corrupt culture around them, because they *were* part of the corrupt culture around them! All false religion is at home in the world! Why? Because the world loves its own. Jesus said that very thing in John 15:19: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own." He said to His unbelieving brothers in John 7:7, "The world cannot hate you." Why? Because you're *of* the world, and the world loves its own. False prophets never have to perform miracles while enduring opposition from the world. Because they don't preach the truth, the world doesn't oppose them but welcomes them with open arms. Satan doesn't attack his own servants. A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

For Paul, the **genuine signs** of a true apostle were not genuine unless they were performed “with all perseverance”—in utmost endurance of the afflictions that belong to all genuine servants of Christ, as they minister in the midst of a world which lies in the power of the evil one. Impostors may have been able to impersonate those works which seemed to indicate spiritual power. But what did Christ say to Paul in verse 9? “*My power is perfected in weakness.*” Perseverance in weakness was a surer sign of genuine apostleship than even the signs, wonders, and miracles that Paul performed.

And so this teaches us, friends, that as we seek to be discerning in our age as to who is a genuine servant of Christ and who is an imposter, we must remember that the **genuine sign** of faithful ministers is not outward displays of favor and strength and victory, but rather the patient endurance of suffering for Christ’s sake while remaining a faithful witness to the Gospel. We live in an age when God no longer authenticates His servants by endowing them with powers to work miracles. Since the fullness of God’s revelation has been given in the complete canon of Scripture, the Scripture itself is its own self-authentication. It is the standard by which we measure the faithfulness of those who come in the name of Christ. But what Scripture teaches us is that the genuine servants aren’t necessarily the ones who are marked by worldly “success,” but the ones who persevere through weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties, and who don’t tamper with the message for the sake of ease and comfort.

And not only does this help us evaluate the genuineness of other ministries, but it helps us measure our own faithfulness as well. We who would profess to serve Christ in this day can be encouraged that weaknesses and difficulties don’t disqualify us or cast doubt upon the usefulness of our ministries. We need not despair if the Lord hasn’t seen fit to bless our labors with the admiration and applause of those around us. External “success” is not the criterion of authenticity. The criterion of authenticity is whether we carry out our ministry in faithfulness to the Scriptures while patiently enduring the afflictions that are sure to mark the ones who must be weak in order to display Christ’s divine power. GraceLife, the faithful servant isn’t the one who can draw the largest crowds, or build the biggest churches, or write the most books, or cull the most accolades. The faithful servant is the one who can count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing and serving Jesus—who can lose everything this world has to offer and call it gain, because they gain Christ, and count Him to be more satisfying than all the applause and all the comfort in the world.

II. Sacrificial Love (vv. 13–18)

So the first **authenticating mark** of Paul’s apostleship is that he had exhibited the genuine signs of a true servant of Christ, which, yes, in his day, meant the working of supernatural miracles, but, which more importantly meant the faithful endurance of suffering on behalf of Christ. But there’s a **second authenticating mark** of Paul’s apostleship that we see in this text, and that is,

number two: **sacrificial love**. And we see Paul emphasize this in verses 13 to 18. He writes, “For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong! Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?”

What lies behind these verses is the accusation that Paul did not love the Corinthians—that he didn’t have their best interests at heart. He’s concerned to explain that the Corinthians were not treated as inferior to other churches, verse 13. That he did not deceive them, verse 16, or take advantage of them, verses 17 and 18. Instead, he’s loved them like a father loves his own children, which has been demonstrated in the sacrifices he’s been willing to make on their behalf.

But what was the basis for the accusation that Paul didn’t love the Corinthians? Well, it was the fact that Paul refused to receive financial support from the Corinthians for his ministry among them. You say, “Wait a second. Paul’s refusal to take the Corinthians money was proof that he didn’t love them?” Yes, that was indeed the charge. And it’s not the first time that Paul’s addressed it. Turn back to 2 Corinthians 11, verses 7 to 11. There he writes, “Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so.” He says, “When I was with you, I didn’t take any of your money. Instead, I humbled myself by working with my own hands. I received monetary support from churches who were much worse off financially than you, so that I would prove no imposition upon you. And not only *have* I refused to take money from you, I will *continue* to refuse to take money from you!” And then in verse 11 he gives voice to the accusation: “Why? Because I do not love you?”

And the key to understanding this is understanding the customs surrounding the Greco-Roman orator. In that time, the visiting rhetorician was like an artist employed by a patron—or, in this case, a group of patrons. The way the rhetorician made his living was by receiving financial remuneration from his patrons. And such a relationship was not only professional, but especially in the case of traveling teachers of wisdom the exchange of money for the teacher’s services would have forged a bond of friendship. Those who supported the teacher would feel a sense of

fellowship and partnership in his teaching. The fact that Paul received support from the poverty-stricken Macedonians but refused to take money from the comparatively well-off Corinthians, meant that he didn't love the Corinthians the way he loved the Macedonians. He didn't feel that same fellowship and partnership in the Gospel with them, and so he didn't want to be obligated to them like he was to his other benefactors. One of the commentators observes that in the ancient world "the refusal of gifts and services was a refusal of friendship and dishonored the donor" (Marshall). Well, this was all the false apostles needed to try to drive a greater wedge between Paul and the Corinthians. "Look at this! He thinks so little of you that he refuses the kind of personal gifts that might obligate him to you!"

And so Paul responds here just as he did before in the previous chapter. Look at verse 13: "For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you?" The only distinction between the Corinthians and the other churches that Paul ministered to was that he didn't receive their financial support. As Pastor John put it in his commentary, "The only thing they did not get from him was a bill" (425). And the only reason he did it this way was to put as much distance between his behavior and that of the false apostles as he possibly could. They were mercenaries. They were in the ministry for the money, and they were taking advantage of the Corinthians.

In the end, the Corinthians would have to decide: who's the genuine apostle who loves and cares for you? The ones who are attaching themselves to you like parasites and draining your livelihood, or the one who will work night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you? "I'm doing this to serve *you*, not as part of some sinister plan to avoid being in your debt!" And so he sarcastically breaks out, at the end of verse 13, "Forgive me this wrong!" "Forgive me for serving you, for exalting you, for refusing to weigh you down and take advantage of you!" At the end of verse 15 he says, "If I love you more, am I to be loved less?" "If I bear significant hardship by refusing to take your money so I could be no burden to you, should you love me less for that?"

Well, because that's just ridiculous on its face, the accusations got even more elaborate. Skip down to verse 16. He says, "But be that as it may"—that is, whether or not I deserve to be loved less for loving you more—"I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit!" You see, it was incontestable that Paul hadn't taken the Corinthians' money himself. So now the false apostles spun this narrative. "Sure, Paul refuses your financial support so he can convince you of his integrity. But all the while he's got you laying aside money every Sunday for this 'collection' he's administrating for 'the poor saints in Jerusalem.' Yeah, right! He's got his middle men coming to collect your money, and you'd better believe a good chunk of that money is going straight into his pocket! This way, he gets on his high horse about how he preached the Gospel to you free of charge, but he's got your money anyway!"

You say, “How could anyone even come up with such an elaborate scheme?” And the answer is: that’s exactly what the false apostles would have done if they were in Paul’s shoes. They would have loved to get their hands on that offering for the saints in Jerusalem. And so they ascribed to Paul, whose authority they desired to undermine, the wicked intentions of their own evil hearts. And John Calvin has such an insightful comment on this verse that I think is instructive for all of us. He says, “It is customary for the wicked impudently to impute to the servants of God whatever they would themselves do, if they had it in their power” (387). And I don’t have time to elaborate on that, but note it for your own further reflection: “It is customary for the wicked [shamelessly] to impute to the servants of God whatever they would themselves do, if they had it in their power.”

And so the charge is: “Paul may pretend to serve you free of charge, but he’s pocketing the money that Titus and the others collected from you for the church in Jerusalem.” And Paul says, “Yeah, right: that’s me! Crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.” And then verses 17 and 18: “Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he?” The Corinthians know Titus! He had just visited them, and his ministry among them was a wild success. He delivered Paul’s severe letter, and the majority of the church had responded so well. Paul says in chapter 7 how comforted and refreshed Titus was by his time with the Corinthians, how his affection for them abounds because of the obedience the Lord brought about in the Corinthians. And then again in chapter 8 verse 17, he speaks about how eager Titus is to return to them, to deliver the letter of 2 Corinthians and to take up the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. The Corinthians know Titus.

Paul also mentions “the brother with him.” In chapter 8 verse 18 Paul says, “We have sent along with him the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches.” And then in verse 22, of another team member: “We have sent with them our brother, whom we have often tested and found diligent in many things.” So here’s the team: (1) Titus, whom they know, love, and trust; (2) another brother who is of the highest reputation among all the churches; and (3) a third man who has been tested and proven diligent in his responsibilities. And Paul writes here in chapter 12 in the past tense, because by the time the Corinthians are reading this letter this team will have already arrived. And he says to them, “Consider how Titus has conducted himself among you in the past, and consider how the three of them have conducted themselves among you on this present visit, and tell me: Have they taken advantage of you in any way?” And the answer is: of course not.

And so then he says, end of verse 18: “Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?” “Don’t you realize, Corinthians, that I sent these men who are walking honestly and humbly before you? Don’t you realize that if you receive them as genuine servants, laboring for your benefit, that the character of the deputies reflects the character of the one who

sent them? If you judge Titus to be innocent of this financial chicanery, how could I be guilty of this elaborate embezzlement scheme?" This whole imagined sinister plot—all of these fanciful accusations—it's all just absurd on its face.

So if that's not true, why *does* Paul refuse the Corinthians' financial gifts? The answer is: because of **sacrificial love**. Look back at verses 14 and 15. "Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you." In other words, I'm going to continue my policy of not taking any money from you. Why, Paul? "For I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls." One commentator calls these verses "one of the most movingly tender passages in the whole Bible" (Denny). Here we see that vexed sternness and tender affection may dwell together in the same fatherly heart.

He says first, "I do not seek what is yours, but you." And what amazing snapshot of genuine **love** that sentence is! "I don't want your stuff! I want you!" I'm not here because of what you can give me! I'm here for you!" I'm not after your money! I want your heart! I want your soul! I want your whole heart to be devoted to Christ and the Gospel, and to me His messenger, just as my whole heart is opened wide to you!" He said that to them earlier, in chapter 6 verses 11 to 13. He says "Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide! ... Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also!" One commentator said, "It is the gift of their lives to Christ, not of their money to himself, that he covets" (Furnish, 555). The church father John Chrysostom paraphrased it this way: "I seek greater things; souls instead of goods; salvation instead of gold" (As in Garland, 531). "I want you! I want to your whole-souled commitment to the Gospel! I want your whole lives invested in the Kingdom of God, devoted to the glory of Jesus! And so I'm *not* going to take your money. Because I don't want what is yours; I want you."

And then he explains further: "For children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." He says, "You're my spiritual children!" In 1 Corinthians 4:15 he told them, "For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel." "That you were saved through the ministry of the Gospel that I brought to you makes me in some sense your spiritual father, and you my dearly beloved children." In 2 Corinthians 11:2, he pictures himself as the protective father of the bride, having betrothed the Corinthians to Christ and being jealous for her purity of devotion to her one husband. He is their father. He is their begetter. He is their betrother. And here he tells them he will therefore be their *provider*. "My dear Corinthians, you must allow me a parent's privilege! It's not your duty to provide for me; it's my joyful duty to provide for you!"

And if you're a parent of adult children—or if you're an adult and you've had parents—you understand this. I remember being bewildered as a child when my family would go out to a

restaurant with my grandparents, and my mom would fight with my grandparents over who would pay the bill. And not the way you'd assume. It wasn't, "You pay for it!" "I'm not paying for it; you pay for it!" They fought over who would *get* to pay. My mom would put the money in the little folder with the receipt, put it as far away from her parents as she could, and they'd get up, take it out, give it back to her, and replace it with their own. Or, later on, they'd secretly sneak money into the other's purse when they thought they wouldn't notice. I always remember thinking, "Hey, if they want to pay for it..." And my mom does that to me now, and like a good son I try to be as accommodating of her generosity as I can be.

But I get it now. And I'm sure I'll get it even more when my kids are grown. There is honor for a parent to provide for their children. There's this sense of, "You're my responsibility." And so there's something of a dishonor for a parent to feel like they're a burden on their children. That's natural. Paul says to the Corinthians, "I don't want our relationship to be that of a client and a patron! You're my children!" And what a rebuke this is to every mercenary motive for the ministry!

He continues, verse 15, by saying, "As your father, I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls." And oh, there is an entire theology of ministry in that single verse! Ministry is sacrificial. "I will spend and be expended!" "I will give of my time, I will give of my energy, I will give of my resources, I will lay down my very life for the sake of your salvation and your maturity in Christ!" In the language of Philippians 2:17, "I will be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith." "If it means that I can strengthen your hands in the battle against sin, if I can weaken your affections for the things of this world, if I can see you increase in maturity in Christ and grow in the grace and knowledge of Him, and if I can know that you'll come out from under the corrupting spell of these blood-sucking heretics, I'll *spend* money! I'll *work* nights making tents! I'll petition poor churches for help! Anything for your souls!"

And you see in that another truth about ministry. It's not only sacrificial; it is beneficial. Paul is willing to make any sacrifice *for the souls* of the Corinthians. He's not talking primarily here about saving them a few pennies. It's not just that his fatherly intuition wants to provide for his children financially. Primarily, he's talking here about *spiritual* benefit—about *soul* benefit. Paul had other spiritual children from whom he was glad to accept financial support. This isn't about picking up the check. It's about exposing the hypocrisy and the greed of these false apostles who have the Corinthians so spellbound, and who—if they won't shake free of it—will drag their souls straight to hell alongside them. Faithful ministry isn't sacrificial for the sake of being sacrificial; faithful ministry is sacrificial for the sake of the *benefit* that accrues to the souls of those to whom we minister.

One other truth about ministry from this verse. It's not only sacrificial and beneficial; it's also joyful. "I will *most gladly* spend and be expended for your souls." We saw this word back in verse 9 when Paul said he would "most gladly" boast in his weaknesses. This is the Greek word *hēdistā*, which, again, comes from the same root word from which we get the term *hedonism*. This term speaks of sweetness, of pleasure, of extreme elation. Paul isn't reluctant or hesitant to spend and be expended for the Corinthians. He's not just bearing down and begrudgingly plodding through his late nights and his thin wallet and his depleted strength. He says he's thrilled to do this! He's overjoyed! He says it back in Philippians 2:17, which we just quoted: "But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, *I rejoice*, and I share my joy with you all!" Why? Because Paul found his joy not in his own personal comforts, but in the magnification of the glory of Jesus Christ. And if Christ would be magnified in his labors, in his sufferings, in his being poured out like a drink offering—if spending and being spent meant that Christ would be magnified in the lives of the Corinthians, then he will spend and be spent *most gladly*. Because where Christ's glory is magnified, there is fullness of joy (Ps 16:11; Phil 1:19–21).

Paul couldn't be justly accused of not loving the Corinthians. His **sacrificial love** for them was not undermined by his refusal to take money from them. Still less was it undermined by some sinister plot to deceive them out of their money with no strings attached. No, his **sacrificial love** was demonstrated by his fatherly affection to joyfully give of his substance—and even of his very life—for the sake of his dear spiritual children, seeking nothing in return but their response of open-hearted love to him and faithfulness to Christ.

Conclusion

And we've made applications along the way, friends, but we must examine ourselves to discover whether we are marked by the signs—perhaps not of a true apostle, but certainly of a true minister of the Gospel, of a true servant of Christ. Can we say along with Paul to our brothers and sisters in GraceLife, at Grace Community Church, "I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls"? Is our ministry to the body of Christ marked by joyful sacrifice for the benefit of our brethren? Can we look our fellow believers in the eyes and say to them, "I don't want what is yours! I want you! I'm not here to fulfill some weird desire I have to feel needed or spiritually superior or whatever! I'm here because I love *you*! Because I want your heart to be wholly devoted to God! I want your soul to find its deepest delight and satisfaction in Jesus!"

That is the pattern for the ministry that each one of us has been called to. May God grant us the grace to be faithful.