

The Minister in Conflict

2 Corinthians 12:19–13:4

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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. And we find ourselves this morning in the section of Paul's letter where he is making preparations for his imminent return to Corinth. In a sense, this entire letter is preparatory for Paul's third visit to the Corinthian congregation. Before this one, Paul had written the severe letter, just after his second, sorrowful visit when he discovered the extent of the damage done by the intruding false apostles. And so he wrote that severe letter, he says in chapter 2 verse 4, "out of much affliction and anguish of heart" and "with many tears," calling them to repent of their distrust of him, to repent of their naïve infatuation with the fleshly triumphalism of the false apostles, and to repent of their willingness to compromise the Gospel.

Well, one of the things we learn from this letter is that, by and large, the severe letter worked. Chapter 7 tells us that Titus delivered the severe letter to the Corinthians, and he witnessed the grace of God at work in their hearts, as the great majority of the congregation did repent of those things. And Paul rejoices, not that they were made sorrowful, but that their sorrow led them to genuine repentance, to the point that Paul concludes chapter 7 in verse 16 by saying, "I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you."

And so in the first seven chapters of this letter, Paul vindicates his character against the accusations of the false apostles, and, in the face of questions about his own apostolic authenticity, he lays out an extended definition and description of New Covenant Gospel ministry. Then, in chapters 8 and 9, he addresses the newly repentant Corinthian congregation with respect to the offering he was organizing for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem. This was something they had begun preparing for before all this conflict with the false apostles had arisen, and so now that the majority of the church has gotten past it, Paul urges them to follow that through to completion. He lets them know that Titus and two other brothers will go to Corinth ahead of him to gather the offering, and he prepares them for that upcoming visit.

And then, in chapters 10 to 13, Paul sets his sights on the false apostles themselves—as well as on an obstinate, unrepentant minority of the church that still lie under the spell of these heretical impostors. You see, the majority of the church repented when Titus delivered the severe letter and ministered among them. But heresy always dies hard, and Paul knew that. And so in chapters 10 to 13 he addresses his opponents head-on, exposing them as servants of Satan himself, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And he forcefully rebukes the unrepentant minority for

failing to make a clean break from these false teachers, while at the same time imploring and entreating them like a father does to wayward children, to once and for all repudiate their Judaizing triumphalism and return to faithfulness to the true Gospel and faithfulness to him, Christ's true apostle.

And in the middle of chapter 12 through the end of chapter 13, as Paul begins to bring his letter to a close, he makes several references to his upcoming return to Corinth. In chapter 12 verse 14 he says, "Here for this third time I am ready to come to you." In verse 20 he says, "When I come," and in verse 21: "when I come again." Chapter 13 verse 1: "This is the third time I am coming to you." In verse 10 he says, "For this reason I am writing these things while absent, so that when present I need not use severity." So this section of the letter is particularly aimed at preparing the Corinthians—especially the yet-unrepentant Corinthians—for Paul's third visit. He's writing as he does now, so that they can take the necessary actions and make the necessary changes ahead of time. This way, when Paul shows up in person, it will be a pleasant reunion rather than a difficult conflict.

And as Paul prepares *himself* for this third visit, he recognizes that it may very well be that difficult conflict is unavoidable. These sheep have been straying. His dear spiritual children, whom he's betrothed to one husband—chapter 11 verse 2—whom he desires to present to Christ as a pure virgin, are flirting with committing spiritual adultery. And in our passage this morning, we see Paul, the faithful, loving *pastor*, aiming to shepherd his sheep in the midst of relational conflict, of doctrinal infidelity, and of moral compromise. Follow along as I read our text: 2 Corinthians 12, verse 19, all the way down to chapter 13 verse 4. "All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. ²⁰For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; ²¹I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced. ^{13:1}This is the third time I am coming to you. 'Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' ²I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone, ³since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. ⁴For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you."

In this text, we get a glimpse of what faithful ministry in the midst of conflict looks like. And this is instructive for us, friends, because, as I've said so many times throughout our study of 2

Corinthians, each and every one of us has been called to ministry. Each one of us has been called to lay our lives down in service to one another in the church—to give ourselves unrelentingly to the task of the building up of the body of Christ, as Ephesians 4 says, by the proper working of each individual part. We are to pray for one another, serve one another, meet one another’s needs, and we are to come alongside one another in the battle against sin and the fight for righteousness by faith.

And as we seek to be faithful to that ministry, GraceLife, we *will* face conflict, because we are not called to minister to the perfect Christians. We are called to minister to sinners—to people like us, who are not yet perfected, who still have sin to mortify and righteousness to pursue. And so we need to know what faithful ministry looks like in the midst of relational conflict, of doctrinal infidelity, and of moral compromise. And we have an example here modeled for us by the Apostle Paul. In these verses that we’ve just read, we behold no less than **eight elements of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict**. And as we work through these eight features of faithful ministry, it is my prayer that we will be equipped to faithfully serve the body, even when things get difficult.

I. Conducted in The Fear of God (12:19a)

Well, that **first element** of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict comes early in verse 19. And that is, number one, that faithful ministry in the midst of conflict is **conducted in the fear of God**. Paul says, “All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ.”

As the Corinthians hear this letter being read aloud for the first time, by the time they get midway through chapter 12, at least some of them would hear it as Paul’s own self-defense and self-vindication in light of the charges of the false apostles. They might get the idea that they’ve successfully placed the Apostle Paul on trial before *them* and have subjected him to a painful and embarrassing cross-examination. And so Paul anticipates that misunderstanding and disabuses them of it. The NAS renders it as a statement, but it’s identical in form to a question, and other translations take it that way: “Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves *to you*? No, dear friends. I have committed no crime that warrants being brought before the bar of your judgment. And even if I had, I am accountable not ultimately to you, but to God Himself. Actually, it is in the sight of *God* that we have been speaking in Christ.” In other words, “More important than *your* judgment of me is *God’s* judgment of me. *He* is my judge! It is at *His* bar that my soul is laid bare and examined according to perfect righteousness!”

He said something very similar in 1 Corinthians 4:3, where he told them, “To me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court. . . . the one who examines me is *the Lord*.” In 2 Corinthians 1:12 he says, “Our proud confidence before the omniscient gaze of

God's holiness is the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." In chapter 2 verse 17 he says, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ *in the sight of God*." In chapter 4 verse 2 he says, "but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience *in the sight of God*."

Now, Paul cared about what the Corinthians thought of him, but only because their reception of him affected their reception of the Gospel, not because he was self-conscious and personally invested in his own reputation before men. Paul lived above that! He was not a slave to the fear of man. He lived above being consumed by what people thought of him. "Well, I know that's the right thing to do, but if I do that, what'll they think of me? I'll look foolish, or wrong, or hot-headed, or timid," or whatever. None of that mattered! Because Paul was intimately aware of the fact that the faithful minister lives his entire life before the open face of God—always in His presence and subject to His constant evaluation and assessment. And there *is* no higher standard! Paul didn't need to be concerned about man's evaluation of him because he always served with the highest level of accountability, because he never lost sight of the truth of Hebrews 4:13, that "there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."

And that is indispensable for us, friends, if we are going to be faithful to serve the body in the midst of conflict. Because the flesh dies hard. And when being faithful to the ministry Christ has called you to requires you to take aim at one another's flesh, it can get ugly pretty quickly. Egos are wounded, pride is hurt, and all of a sudden accusations start getting hurled around. And in those moments, we *cannot* conduct our ministry in the fear of man, driven by merely human estimations of our conduct. We must have it settled—long before we face those conflicts—to **conduct our ministry in the fear of God**, to have an audience of One. Over against all of the criticism of men—and even over against all the praise of men—we must reckon God and God alone to be our judge, so that His Word and His Word alone will be the rule of our lives and ministries.

II. Driven by the Edification of the Body (12:19b)

There's a **second element** of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict that we see in this text. And that is, number two: it is **driven by the edification of the body**. Look again at verse 19. "All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; *and all for your upbuilding, beloved.*"

In the first place, Paul sought to correct a false impression the Corinthians may have had, namely, that Paul was defending himself to them and not speaking in the sight of God. Here he corrects a second false impression: that his defense and vindication of his ministry has been driven by selfish motives. He says, “My design in speaking as I have hasn’t been to win a debate, or to clear my name, or to preserve my reputation. My design this entire time has only ever been for your **edification!** I only want to see you built up and mature in Christ. I’m after *your* growth, not *my* glory.”

And this emphasis on edification is evident throughout this letter. Back in chapter 10 verse 8, Paul said, “For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave *for building you up* and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame.” And he’ll say the same thing as he brings the letter to a close in chapter 13 verse 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.” The apostolic authority that Christ gave to Paul wasn’t given so that he could domineer and tyrannize and subjugate and destroy the people of God. The whole reason Christ called Paul as an apostle was to build up His body. As he said back in chapter 1 verse 24: “Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you *for your joy*.” “My entire life is dedicated to increasing your joy in Jesus, so that as you delight more and more in Him, you’ll delight less and less in sin, and so will be built up in Christ!”

And friends, this is what *our* lives must be dedicated to. This is what ministry *is*, most fundamentally. It is laying our lives down, sacrificing our comforts, being willing to endure all manner of hostility and conflict and difficulty, so that we can increase one another’s joy in Christ; so that we can display Jesus as glorious, as beautiful, as sweet, as satisfying; so that He can be seen and enjoyed for who He is; and so that worship and honor unto Him would overflow unto the edification of His people.

GraceLife, is that what drives you? Is your ministry to your brothers and sisters at Grace Community Church **driven by the edification of the body**? If it’s not—if you’re more concerned about being thought well of, or not making waves, or being polite and not becoming like one of those weird, super-spiritual types; if you’re concerned about your reputation or your comfort or your ease—you will not be faithful to your ministry. You won’t be bothered with the discomfort of awkward conversations or with early morning commitments to bring refreshments, or serve in nursery, or give someone a ride to church. You won’t subject yourself to the pain of being misunderstood when you try to lovingly bring correction to your brothers and sisters. But if you are **driven by the edification of the body**, you will do whatever needs to be done—at whatever cost to yourself—to minister faithfully in the midst of conflict.

III. Committed to Faithful Accountability (12:20–21)

There's a **third element** of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict. Not only is it conducted in the fear of God and driven by the edification of the body. But *because* it is driven by the edification of the body, it is also, **number three, committed to faithful accountability**. And we see this in verses 20 and 21. He says, "For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced."

Paul is concerned to do what he can so that his third visit to Corinth will go much more pleasantly than his second visit to Corinth. Though he will not shy away from conflict if the edification of the body depends on it, there is nothing in him that relishes conflict. He takes no delight in having to plunge into difficulty and awkwardness and tension. And so naturally, he wants to do everything in his power to make this impending visit and enjoyable one for both him and the Corinthians. And that meant taking the opportunity to confront sin head-on in this preparatory letter, so that they could make the necessary changes before he got there.

He voices his concern that if this obstinate pocket of the Corinthian church doesn't change course and repent, he won't find them as he wishes to find them—that is, making progress in grace, being conformed to the image of Christ, growing in sanctification. Instead he may find them weighed down by the deeds of the flesh. And what follows are a couple of lists of two broad categories of sins—sins that you would expect to be plaguing a church who is infatuated with false teaching and skeptical of the true Gospel of Christ.

The first is a list of sins of relational conflict that undermine the *unity* of a church. "Strife" speaks of discord, quarreling, and contention, unavoidable given the wiles of the false apostles. "Jealousy" is that party-spirit, that self-centered narrowness that is suspicious of those outside of one's faction. "Angry tempers" refers to outbursts of anger that fuel rivalries. "Disputes" *are* those rivalries, the unnecessary bickering with one another that is opposed to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. "Slanders" and "gossip" are an obvious pair, both denoting evil-speaking. While slander speaks of open, public vilification, gossip refers to secret attacks on a person's character, "derogatory information about someone that is offered in a tone of confidentiality" (BDAG). And the kind of conflicts and quarrels in Corinth cannot survive without these two ingredients of slander and gossip. Nor can they survive without "arrogance," *phusiōsis*. It means a puffing up, a swelling. It refers to having an inflated view of yourself, thinking of yourself more highly than you ought, and then acting in accordance with that failure of self-knowledge. And "disturbances" speaks of the disorder, confusion, and tumultuousness

that mark mob riots. This is what Paul fears he will find on his third visit to Corinth unless they make a significant course correction.

And then, in verse 21, he speaks of another set of sins. And while the former struck at the church's unity, these sins undermine a church's *purity*. "Impurity" is *akatharsia*. It's the general word for anything that was filthy or dirty. It was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to translate the concept of what was morally and ceremonially unclean. It is often paired with the next word: "immorality." This is that word *porneia*, from which we get the word *pornography*. It speaks of any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage. In 1 Corinthians 6:18, Paul told the Corinthians with frank simplicity: "Flee immorality. Every other sin a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body." And then "sensuality," *aselgeia*. And this emphasizes the lack of restraint upon sexual sin. This is flagrant, unbridled, shameless licentiousness—the kind of recklessness that people abandon themselves to when social and religious norms mean nothing to them.

It's this kind of pagan immorality that the Corinthians were saved *out* of. And apparently some of them had begun to be ensnared once again by the sins that characterized their wicked culture. And what's interesting about this is: as we've navigated our way through this letter and the issues Paul was facing with the Corinthians, we'd have expected the first list—the sins of relational conflict that undermine unity. But we haven't heard much at all about these sins of moral impurity, and so this is a bit surprising to see. Unless you realize that the doctrinal and attitudinal sins that had plagued Corinth are the soil in which sexual immorality grows. It is never long before the doctrinal and spiritual defection in a congregation that tolerates false teaching is manifest in the weakened morality of that congregation.

Now, what do we learn from all this? Why do I say that these verses teach us that faithful ministry in the midst of conflict is **committed to faithful accountability**? Because Paul names the Corinthians' specific sins! He calls them out on the carpet! He doesn't deal in vague generalities because he's shy about embarrassing people! He doesn't say, "Come on guys. You're dealing with a lot of 'issues.' You're dealing with unfaithfulness in some significant areas, and you need to clean that up before I get there?" No! He lists out their sins one by one!

And then, on top of that, he makes several references to his third visit, which will serve as their day of reckoning in these areas. Look at verse 20 again: "For I am afraid that perhaps *when I come I may find you* to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish." Verse 21: "I am afraid that *when I come again*" I may mourn over those who haven't repented. He's letting them know that he's going to hold them **accountable**. He's named their specific sins, and he's saying, "We're going to find out how you're doing when I see you in a few months. Don't think I'm going to just throw out a few flowery exhortations and forget about it. I'm going to check up on you! You're going to have to answer for your behavior!"

And friends, we desperately need to put this into practice with one another. Sometimes we can just be so polite. We don't want to have those awkward conversations. We don't want to name sin. We don't want to talk about being held accountable to one another. We're happy to just deal in vague generalities and trite clichés, and let our brothers and sisters be ravaged by their sin, because we fear their frowns more than we love their souls. Paul refused to play church, just lobbing directives from afar. Even though it meant wearying travel, he was going to be personally involved in the lives of his people, so he could hold them accountable to the instruction they'd received. And if we're going to minister faithfully to one another in the midst of sin and difficulty, we need to be committed to the same.

IV. Invested in the Lives of the Brethren (12:20–21)

And that leads us very naturally to a **fourth element of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict** that we see in this text. And that is, number four: it is **invested in the lives of the brethren**. And we see it particularly in verse 21, paying specific attention to the words Paul uses to describe himself at the thought of finding the Corinthians in a state of unrepentance. He says, "I am afraid that when I come again my God may *humiliate* me before you, and I may *mourn* over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced."

Paul is saying that if he comes again and finds them yet unrepentant, he will be humiliated by it, and will mourn over their sin. You say, "Why should Paul be humiliated by their lack of repentance? He's not responsible for their sin." Well, no, the fault of their sin would be their own. But it's because Paul has so knit his heart to the Corinthians—because they are his dear spiritual children, whom he had begotten in his missionary efforts—that for him, their success was his success, and their failure was his failure. Just like a father is humiliated by the rebellion of his children—precisely because how much he loves his children, because of how profoundly he has invested his life in their lives—so is Paul so **invested** in the lives of the Corinthians that their sin is his humiliation. Their faithlessness is his grief.

What did he say in chapter 11 verses 28 and 29? After cataloging all of his intense sufferings, he says, "Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" Paul's heart was absolutely bound up in the Corinthians' spiritual progress! Charles Hodge captured it this way. He wrote, "Nothing filled the apostles with greater delight than to see the churches of their care steadfast in faith and in obedience to the truth; and nothing so pained and humbled them as the departure of their disciples from the paths of truth and holiness" (673).

And even though we are not apostles, and even though not all of us are pastors, the very same thing should be true of each and every one of us. Your hearts should be so **invested** in the spiritual well-being of the saints whom Christ has entrusted into your care—which is to say: the members of your local church—that their joys are felt as your joys, that their sorrows are your sorrows, their shame your shame, their sin your cause for humiliation and grief. When a brother or sister stumbles, friends, you should feel it! It should affect you like it was a member of your own family—your own son or daughter. And your response should be to seek out whatever means possible for you to be a blessing to that person—whether that means showing up and praying with them, weeping with them, accompanying them to the doctor, or even if it means getting in their face, and calling out their sin, and holding them accountable.

V. Devoted to Believing the Best (12:20–21)

Faithful ministry in the midst of conflict is conducted in the fear of God, driven by the edification of the body, committed to faithful accountability, and invested in the lives of the brethren. It is also, **number five, devoted to believing the best**. And once again, we see this by paying attention to the details of verses 20 and 21. Note how Paul speaks here: “For I am afraid that *perhaps* when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that *perhaps* there will be strife, jealousy,” and so on. Verse 21: “I am afraid that when I come again my God *may* humiliate me before you, and I *may* mourn over many of those who have...not repented.”

You can hear a degree of uncertainty there. You see, Paul’s attitude is not one of pessimistic resignation. He’s not exhorting them to repent, all the while in the back of his mind thinking, “These dissolute fools aren’t going to repent! I mean, I know I’ve got to go through the motions to give them the chance, but I better gear up for a fight, because there is no way *they’re* going to change!” That’s not his attitude at all! Philip Hughes captures it perfectly. He says, “His spirit is that of a father’s affectionate restraint, who will not pass judgment until he has seen the situation for himself. ... He is unwilling meanwhile to adopt a tone of certainty regarding reports which have reached him, for he loves them, and ‘love hopeth all things’” (470). He *loves* them! And, as 1 Corinthians 13:7 says, love “*believes* all things” and “*hopes* all things.” And so he takes no perverse delight in being able to lay the smack down as payback for all the grief they’ve caused him. No, he remains hopeful that he’ll never have to deliver that discipline. He believes that the grace of God can so work in their hearts as to lead them to genuine repentance, so that by the time he gets there it’s like a whole different church.

You see, faithful ministers are **devoted to believing the best** about their fellow-believers, even in the midst of conflict. They remain resiliently optimistic about the Lord’s grace at work in the lives of their brothers and sisters—even when they don’t necessarily deserve that optimism—

because that confidence isn't ultimately in *them*, but in the sovereign grace of Christ at work *within* them.

And if you are going to serve your wayward brethren well in the midst of conflict and difficulty, you need to be **devoted to believing the best** about them. You need to be possessed by an indomitable, unwavering, confident hope in the power of God's grace to overcome sin in the lives of His people, by an intransigent optimism that the Holy Spirit can change hearts and subdue sin, even in the most stubborn people. Because there is nothing more deflating for someone who is genuinely battling against sin than to have those they care about and respect the most lose confidence in them, and expect them to fail. Your fellow-believers need you to **believe the best** of them. They need to know that you don't think they're a lost cause, but that you have confidence that the grace of Christ is at work within them—that their sin is conquerable by the Almighty King of Grace Himself! Dear friends, "Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound!" And therefore we can **believe the very best** of God's people, because we believe the very best of His sanctifying grace.

VI. Aimed at Genuine Repentance (12:21)

There's a **sixth element of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict** that I want to mention just briefly. Number six: it is **aimed at genuine repentance**. We observe that throughout the entirety of this passage, but Paul mentions it explicitly toward the end of verse 21, where he says, "I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and *not repented* of the impurity, immorality, and sensuality which they have practiced." Where there has been sin, faithful ministry always **aims at genuine repentance**.

This is at the heart of a biblical understanding of church discipline. We don't confront people in their sin because we have a twisted desire to pluck specks from everyone's eyes while logs remain in our own. We don't beat people over the head with their sin as a way of insisting on their inferiority or our superiority. And we certainly don't practice church discipline as a means of retaliation or retribution for personal offenses. No: church discipline exists for the *restoration* of the one trapped in sin.

And restoration happens upon repentance from sin. In Matthew 18, the ground zero of church discipline passages, it says, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother." To listen to the one who has shown you your fault is to confess your fault as sin and to repent of it. The parallel passage in Luke 17:3 uses that language: "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." Repentance is the goal. And so this is our aim in any confrontation of sin: that the brother or sister ensnared in the clutches of sin would *confess* their sin, seek forgiveness, and forsake their sin in genuine, heartfelt repentance.

VII. In Accord with Biblical Discipline (13:1–2)

But when there is not genuine repentance, faithful ministry in the midst of conflict progresses, number **seven, in accord with biblical discipline**. Look with me at verses 1 and 2 of chapter 13. Paul says, “This is the third time I am coming to you. ‘Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone.”

In the past, Paul has been lenient and longsuffering, urging and pleading with people to repent. But if there will not be repentance, then there must be discipline. He begins by saying, “This is the third time I am coming to you.” “This will be my third visit.” The first was when he founded the church, which he speaks about in Acts 18 and in 1 Corinthians 2. The second was his painful visit, where he discovered the mutiny taking place because of the false apostles, which he speaks about in 2 Corinthians 2. This would be the third visit. And then he quotes, rather abruptly, without introduction, Deuteronomy 19:15, which says, “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.”

This was the Mosaic Law’s standard for legal testimony in a judicial proceeding. It could not be that someone was condemned on the basis of the testimony of a single witness. Why? Because if that were the standard, it would be too easy for a malicious person with a personal vendetta to destroy someone’s life with a false accusation. And so the Law requires at least two and preferably three witnesses to confirm the truth of a matter in which there are criminal penalties. You say, “Wait a minute. Won’t that mean that offenders who perpetrate their crimes in secret will get away with it?” And Charles Hodge has a great comment in answer to that question. He writes, “In the judgment of God, therefore, it is better that many offenders should go unpunished through lack of testimony, than that the security of reputation and life should be endangered by allowing a single witness to establish a charge against any man” (675). And what a word that is for our culture at this time! You say, “But won’t that result in terrible injustice? How could God leave such criminals unpunished?” Oh, He won’t. They may go unpunished for a time, in *this* life. But no one escapes the inflexible bar of God’s justice. And those who would violate this stipulation of the Law of God because they think they care more for justice than God does would do well to remember that the Judge of all the earth *will* deal justly, that vengeance is His, and that He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

Well, this standard for legal testimony is quoted several times in the New Testament as the protocol for church discipline. In Matthew 18:16, after there has been private rebuke for sin, Jesus says, “But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that”—and then

He quotes Deuteronomy 19:15—“so that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed.’” Also in 1 Timothy 5:19 and Hebrews 10:28. So Paul cites this classic text on church discipline, and he says, “This will be my third visit. When I was there the second time, I warned you. Now these three visits will rise up and testify against you and confirm the matter of your unrepentant sin. And if that happens, I promise you: I will not spare anyone.”

Listen to the severity of that! The word translated “to spare” is *pheidomai*. It originally referred to refraining from killing a defeated enemy on the battlefield! And so it eventually came to mean “to be merciful toward.” But what a picture! Back in chapter 1 verse 23, Paul said that it was to *spare* them that he delayed his planned visit to Corinth. Now he says that the time of forbearance is past. He’s coming again. And if they don’t repent, he’s going to assert the fullness of his apostolic authority **in accord with biblical discipline**. He says something similar in 1 Corinthians 4, verses 18 to 21. There he wrote, “Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?” You say, “How could Paul speak this way?! to those whom he says he loves as children?!” And Calvin answers well. He says, “As it is the part of a good parent to forgive and bear with many things, so it is the part of a foolish parent, and one that has no proper regard for the welfare of his children, to neglect to use severity when there is occasion for it” (391–92). Proverbs 13:24: “He who withholds his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently.”

And so Paul says, “The protocols have been followed. Your behavior has testified to itself before the whole church, and my three visits and several warnings and urgent pleadings for you to repent stand as witnesses against you. If there is no change by the time I get there, I will not spare anyone. Whoever does not repent will be excommunicated, expelled from the life of the church, cut off from the fellowship of the redeemed, because your conduct has become indistinguishable from that of the enemies of Christ.” This had to happen with the man who had his father’s wife, back in 1 Corinthians 5, where he said, “I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Paul would do it again in the case of Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom, he says in 1 Timothy 1:20, he has handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme. And he says he will do the same with the Corinthians.

VIII. Shaped by the Gospel of Christ (13:3–4)

Well, we have seen that faithful ministry in the midst of conflict is conducted in the fear of God, driven by the edification of the body, committed to faithful accountability, invested in the lives of the brethren, devoted to believing the best, aimed at genuine repentance, and in accord with

biblical discipline. The **eighth** and final **element** of faithful ministry in the midst of conflict comes in chapter 13 verses 3 and 4. And that is: it is **shaped by the Gospel of Christ**. Paul says “...since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you.”

If this talk of church discipline, and excommunication, and sparing no one is shocking to you—if it seems to be a display of the kind of authority that Paul has heretofore been unwilling to display—that’s the point. The Corinthians were demanding proof that Paul was genuinely Christ’s apostle, precisely because he had refused to assert his apostolic authority, but dealt with them, chapter 10 verse 1, in the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Their unbiblical triumphalism had so dominated their thinking that they judged Paul’s meekness as weakness. They preferred the false apostles’ aggressive authoritarianism! even, as we learn in chapter 11 verse 20, if it meant that they were enslaved, devoured, taken advantage of, and smacked in the face! And Paul says, “Is apostolic *power* the proof you need for my apostleship? If you don’t repent before this third visit, you’ll have all the power you can handle.”

And you say, “Wait a minute! Hasn’t Paul, this whole time, been talking about how the weakness of Christ’s cross is the antidote to the triumphalism of the false apostles? How can he start talking about exercising power now?” Well, he reminds them that Christ “is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God.” The Corinthians were no strangers to divine power through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The signs of a true apostle had been performed among them, chapter 12 verse 12. Paul’s message and preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of *power*, 1 Corinthians 2:4. And that a church was *ever* planted in the middle of a city like Corinth was the clearest evidence that the power of God had worked among them, miraculously saving them out of rank paganism, idolatry, and immorality.

Paul says, “This corresponds with the power of God! Yes, Christ was manifested in weakness among you. That weakness took Him all the way to the cross. But the story doesn’t end on Good Friday! There is resurrection Sunday, where the Christ who was crucified because of weakness rose again from the grave by the omnipotent power of God! And not only *was* He raised, but He *lives* to this day, having ascended to the right hand of His Father, and having been seated on His Father’s throne where He rules the world as its rightful Lord. And when *Christ* comes again, friends, He will not spare anyone. On that Day, the day of mercy will have passed, the time for forbearance will be over, and where there has not been repentance, unrighteousness will be punished wherever it is found, as the King of kings and Lord of lords will strike down His enemies with the sword of His wrath, as He rules the nations with a rod of iron.

And dear sinner, if you are here this morning and you are outside of Christ, if you, like the Corinthians, are still clinging to some sin that you refuse to repent of, I plead with you to repent this very moment! Do not presume upon the mercy of Jesus! He is coming! And you cannot withstand Him in the day of His wrath! The holy God *must* punish sin. He will not leave the guilty unpunished, but will destroy them eternally in the lake of fire. Dear sinner, your sin *must* be punished. But the Good News is that in His grace God has sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to bear the punishment of sinners! The innocent one to be punished in the place of the guilty! On the cross, Christ has borne the sins of His people, so that we who are guilty may justly be declared righteous. Our sins *must* be punished, but, wonder of wonders, they may be punished in a righteous substitute! He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And we lay hold of that righteousness by trusting in Christ alone for that righteousness. Dear friend, turn from your sin and trust in Christ this morning.

And for those of us who have, note the lesson this has for us in our ministry to one another. It is to be **shaped by the Gospel of Christ**. In Paul's mind, the Gospel was not just the message that got people saved. The Gospel shaped his entire life and ministry. When he considered what the proper course of action was in a given circumstance, he was consciously thinking about the Gospel—about the weakness of Christ in His incarnation and crucifixion, about the power of Christ in His resurrection, ascension, and session—and he was asking how those truths were to be applied in his everyday life. Since Christ suffered in weakness, how should I respond to suffering? Since He's risen again, how should sanctifying power be on display in my life? Brothers and sisters, bring every aspect of your life under the scrutiny of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, so that your life and ministry will be **shaped by the Gospel of Christ**.