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## ***God's Word to a Hesitating Church***

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. (7:1)

***“Wising Up to the Enemy’s Schemes”***

**May 11, 2014**

**Sermon Text:** 2 Corinthians

**Scripture Reading:** Matt 19:16-24

### **Introduction-**

*“Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church is about a church that had been established by Christ through a faithful minister’s preaching of the gospel, which then comes under attack from, 1) False teachers, and 2) the*

*arrogance and sin of the members. It is a call from that faithful minister to turn from their errors and stop restraining their affections for him, and thus, for the Lord.”*

As we begin our study through Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, we find ourselves meeting up with people who were hesitating. They were holding back – holding themselves back from giving themselves fully to Paul and to the gospel, and thus to Christ. They were “restrained in their affections” as Paul will put it.

At the same time, they were giving, as perhaps we might say, “the other half of their heart” to people they should have broken away from. This was a dangerous situation and Paul does all that he can here to help them overcome the things which were causing them to withhold themselves.

You will recall from our study of the letter to the Galatians that the issue there was false teachers who added

works (the OT law, circumcision) to the gospel. They more directly attacked Paul's gospel, presenting a false one in its place. Similarly, false teaching had been introduced at Corinth. You might remember one example from 1 Cor 15, the denial of the resurrection. And there was also a kind of libertinism that threatened the Corinthians too, arising from their Greek culture.

But here in 2 Corinthians we have enemy attacks coming with a somewhat different strategy. Namely, these enemies attacked Paul himself. Not physically, but they demeaned his character and planted doubts among the Corinthians about his motives toward them. If the strategy in Galatia was to attack the message, here in Corinth it was to attack the messenger.

Let's apply this matter to ourselves, and then we will do a kind of "walk through" of Paul's letter and see these themes first hand. Application then:

One of the marks of a true Christian is *love*. Love for Christ, and love for Christ's people. "By this they will know...if you have love for one another." The church, the body of Christ, consists of people who are joined to Christ and joined to one another, led by the same Spirit, serving the same Lord. Paul calls them his brothers and sisters. He says we are

members of one another, and that we are blocks in a holy temple of the Lord. Of the apostates at Ephesus, John said "they went out from us because they were not of us" and he gives us numbers of "tests" to help us recognize the true people of Christ. We are to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Holy Spirit among us.

Now, there many hindrances to this unity of believers with one another. That is to say, there are things that can cause us to *withhold ourselves from Christ's people and from Christ's messengers*, several of which we will find identified right here in 2 Corinthians, all of which are schemes of the devil:

- False teachers who claim to be Christ's representatives and who deride and slander Christ's true people in order to draw us away from one another
- Continued associations with the world in a way that Paul calls "being bound together."
- Ignorance regarding what a true minister and ministry of Christ looks like – that is, seeing things through the world's estimation rather than according to God's wisdom.
- False Christians who have hurt us and betrayed us, perhaps tempting us toward isolation, keeping distant from one another.

- Temptations to avoid persecution by keeping distant from real Christians who are suffering for Christ.

These conditions and strategies were present in the Corinthian church, and Paul addresses them in this letter.

There is no doubt, and I am sure that you will agree, that if we as a church and as individuals are going to advance in godliness and if we are going to experience the joy and peace that He has for us, then *we* must overcome these obstacles that cause us to be restrained in our affections for one another. Listen to this statement of the theme of 2 Corinthians once again:

*“Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church is about a church that had been established by Christ through a faithful minister’s preaching of the gospel, which then comes under attack from, 1) False teachers, and 2) the arrogance and sin of the members. It is a call from that faithful minister to turn from their errors, to turn from those enemies who would alienate them from him, stop restraining their affections for him, and thus, for the Lord.”*

Let’s make a survey of Paul’s letter and see these things firsthand:

2 Corinthians 1:5-6 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (6) If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Paul will speak of his *suffering* several times in this letter. He calls these experiences “Christ’s sufferings.” Apparently the Corinthians – with the “help” of Paul’s enemies – were standing off from Paul because his suffering did not seem, to them, to be a mark of God’s blessing and of greatness. We must battle with the very same misconceptions today, right? Just what does a Christian – a real Christian – look like? What is the experience in this world of a true servant of Christ? Is he a successful, sharp-looking person in an impeccable 3-piece suit, sporting a Hawaiian tan? Or might he (or she) be of a rather different nature?

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you-- his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind-- (Isa 52:13-14)

We continue--

2 Corinthians 1:12-13 For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. (13) For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge and I hope you will fully acknowledge--

These enemies also encouraged the Corinthians to believe that Paul was guilty of duplicity. In other words, that he said one thing but didn't follow through or intending all along to do something else. *His word was not to be trusted.* He continues-

2 Corinthians 1:16-18 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. (17) Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? (18) As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No.

Enemies of Christ ALWAYS try to undermine Christ's servants and alienate Christ's people from one

another. A common tactic is to work to steal away the hearts of the people from Christ's true people and ministers, planting seeds of doubt, encouraging us to keep distant from one another, thus diminishing the effectiveness of our witness for Christ.

Here is another issue that hindered unity in that church:

2 Corinthians 2:10-11 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, (11) so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

We see the very same issue today. We are going to sin, and sin against one another. *When there is genuine repentance* then we forgive and refuse to let Satan put a wedge between us.

Here now Paul says more about the real appearance and nature of Christ's servants and the gospel:

2 Corinthians 2:15-16 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, (16) to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

Once more, Paul instructs and corrects the Corinthians' worldly wisdom which led them to hold back from a real Apostle. The fact is that the gospel and those who live it and display Christ, *stink* like the stench of death to this world. It is a reminder to them that they are perishing, and that this world is perishing.

And again, the enemy's accusations against Paul are evident:

2 Corinthians 3:1-2 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? (2) You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.

Always working to alienate these people from Paul and from the gospel. "Letters." Perhaps this might be similar to our day in which many false teachers have all kinds of high and mighty academic degrees, yet they do not know Christ nor has He sent them. I could say quite a lot about how churches "call" their pastors and the serious deficiencies of the typical process.

2 Corinthians 4:2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with

God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

See it once again? A true minister of Christ does not practice trickery with God's Word. He is not out to con people. Paul's critics were guilty of such things themselves.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. (17) For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, (18) as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Here again is this issue of suffering for Christ. The Corinthians were wavering because they looked for an *outward glory and greatness* in Paul – but saw just the opposite. See the same thing here:

2 Corinthians 5:11-12 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. (12) We are not commending

ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart.

There it is. Outward appearance. To the degree that our thinking is wrong about what the Lord's true ministry and people look like, to that degree we will withhold ourselves from one another and be drawn off by counterfeits. Our boast is not in "outward appearance." It's true, isn't it? How many Christians today are drawn away by some entity that claims to be serving Christ and has "outward greatness" but is not of Him at all?

Let me illustrate this. In my interaction with many, many people – abuse victims, pastors, Christians – through the blog ministry, I am seeing a pattern. Outward appearance is what people flock after. The pastors and churches that are "in the news" are the bigger ones with flashy appearance, charismatic preachers who are movers and shakers in their circles. They have a program for everyone. They are in demand as a speaker here and there. They have a new book coming out. Now, let me tell you what is really going on inside the walls of such places:

- There is a constant battle for power and control,
- The homes and personal lives of these "greats" is anything but godly
- In reality, these kinds of "shining examples of Christianity" are bullies.

At the same time, the pastors that I primarily connect with (and there aren't very many) are pastors of small churches, they are pretty much unknown, and they know full well what it is to suffer for Christ.

*Because so many Christian judge according to outward appearance by the world's standards of greatness, they are drawn to embrace the enemy of Christ and to stand of from genuine servants of Christ.*

Here is even more of a description of the true servant of Christ:

2 Corinthians 6:3-13 We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, (4) but as servants of God we **commend** ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, (5) beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; (6) by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; (7) by truthful speech, and

the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; (8) through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; (9) as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; (10) as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (11) We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. (12) You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. (13) In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

Notice very carefully the heartfelt plea Paul gives them in vss 11-13. This really identifies how they had been holding back. The false teachers/critics had sown their evil seed. This not only results in them withholding themselves from Paul, but then really from Christ as well and from the truth of Christ's Word that Paul preached. You see the enemy's ever-present strategy: alienate Christ's people from Christ's pastors and teachers, alienate Christ's people from one another.

Now, here is a very important passage that identifies a very common way that

a Christian might be hindered in his affections for Christ and Christ's people:

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? (15) What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? (16) What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (17) Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, (18) and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

Let me issue the same challenge to you as Paul does in this text:

***“What ‘unclean thing’ or idol or people might you be living among and thereby being hindered in your ability to draw close to the Lord, and for Him to draw close to you? What factors and relationships in your life***

***are alienating you from Christ's people and from Christ's ministers?"***

An unequal yoking with an unbeliever will alienate a Christian from the body of Christ and from the Lord without fail. You cannot give yourself to unsaved people in "yoked together" relationships, even if (perhaps especially if) they are family, and give yourself fully to the Lord and to His people. Can't happen. Won't happen. This was going on at Corinth. In all of our lives there are what has been called "necessary endings" in regard to certain relationships. This has been one of the most consistent damaging factors I have seen in people over the years – that they cling to an unhealthy bond with people who are darkness, and most often it seems such relationships are familial.

You see Paul's same pleas again-

2 Corinthians 7:2 Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one.

***"What do we think is going to happen in respect to our affections for one another in this church if we are yoked together with people who hate this church?"*** That really is what Paul is asking these Corinthians.

Now, this background helps us make sense out of the importance of chapters 8-9 which concern an offering that Paul was gathering from the churches for the Christians who were suffering in Judea. See the model of the churches of Macedonia that Paul sets before the Corinthians here:

2 Corinthians 8:1-5 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, (2) for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. (3) For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, (4) begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints-- (5) and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

See it? They *gave themselves* to the Lord and then to Paul and his company. They *gave themselves* fully through this offering to the other believers. They didn't hold back at all, and the Corinthians need to do the same.

2 Corinthians 8:7-8 But as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all



earnestness, and in our love for you--see that you excel in this act of grace also. (8) I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

Now, pay careful attention here:

2 Corinthians 9:6-12 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (7) Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (8) And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. (9) As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." (10) He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. (11) You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. (12) For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.

This is not speaking merely of money. Paul is continuing to speak about Christians giving themselves to the Lord and to one another, and notice what the result it - *You will be enriched in every way.*

***When we hold ourselves back, when we allow our hearts to be restrained in our affections for one another, we are the ones who are impoverished.***

There have been many, many attacks on this church over the years (as there will be toward any real church) *that have tried to keep us distant from and distrusting of one another.* There have been false teachers. There have been people who wanted to be first and have their own following. People who criticized the ministry here and sowed discord. There have been false believers come in among us and put on a great saintly show, only to be found out to be counterfeit later.

*But we must not permit these things to prevent us from giving ourselves to one another and to the Lord.* This also means that we simply cannot permit ongoing, unrepentant, hypocrisy and hardness of heart to plant itself here. Do you see what it does? It does the same things that we are seeing were happening in the church at Corinth-

- A distrust of true ministers.
- A distrust of each other, and

- A withholding of our affections. So we need to continue to pray, and to pray with even more earnestness that the Lord would reveal the counterfeit. That he would not permit hidden reefs to exist here and cause Christ's people to stumble by working to alienate us from one another and thus from Christ and His truth. That he would bring such a person repentance, or expose them.

Let me issue then this warning:

***“God sees and knows all things. Christ will have His church to be genuine and holy. ‘...let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.’ This cleansing can come through real repentance. But for the hard-hearted, be sure that the Lord is not going to permit you to remain in His church forever. I hope that there is no such person in this church. But if there is, if anyone is playing the hypocrite, walking in sin secretly and playing the saint on Sunday for personal glory, be sure that the Lord sees it and He will bring it to light. As His Word says, be sure your sin will find you out.”***

This does not need to happen to a single person here. All anyone need do is humble themselves and be honest and repent.

Paul continues, and we see his response here once again is to the enemies who were trying to undermine his ministry at Corinth and turn the people away from the truth of the gospel –

2 Corinthians 10:1-10 I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ-I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!-- (2) I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. (3) For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. (4) For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. (5) We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, (6) being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (7) Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. (8) For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for

destroying you, I will not be ashamed. (9) I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. (10) For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."

And then the crescendo grows as Paul continues to deal with these wicked opponents who would steal the hearts of the people-

2 Corinthians 11:1-6 I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! (2) For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. (3) But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (4) For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (5) Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. (6) Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

And again –

2 Corinthians 11:12-15 And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. (13) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (15) So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

It turns out that this Apostle whom the Corinthians were considering rejecting, had even seen heaven! –

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. (2) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. (3) And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- (4) and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. (5) On behalf of

this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. (6) Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. (7) So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (10) For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

And of course his point is that his WEAKNESS and suffering were actually the result of the Lord's hand upon him to keep him humble after showing him such glorious things. They were the marks of a genuine apostle and minister of Christ. The Corinthians, prompted by these enemies among them, were

interpreting Paul's physical weakness and infirmities as a sign he was inferior!

And then he issues this fearsome command to those who would work to destroy the church –

2 Corinthians 13:1-5 This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (2) I warned 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-- (3) since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. (4) For 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. (5) Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

### Conclusion

Christ's messengers will always be attacked by Christ's enemies with the intent of turning people away from the

truth of the gospel. You can think right on through the Bible and see that this is the inevitable pattern and tactic of the enemy. Distort the message and sow disdain for the messenger. Malign and slander the real people of Christ and sow discord among us so that we withhold ourselves from one another and perhaps even yoke ourselves with the wicked.

In the past I think that we have all been surprised at such attacks, and we have at times given in to the doubts that enemies have planted. But we need not be surprised. We can expect that if we are really the people of Christ and if then this is a true church established by Him, then we are most certainly going to experience these kinds of tactics which are designed to disrupt and destroy.

As we spend some weeks now moving through this Second Letter to the Corinthians, let's all be praying that the Lord will teach us and give us wisdom and insight into what is truth and what is error, who we should be giving ourselves to and who we should be coming out from among.