

Perfecting Holiness in the Fear of God

2 Corinthians 7:1–7
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The apostle Paul wanted the Corinthians to open their hearts to him, just as he and Timothy had opened their hearts to them. But this required two things. We looked at the first requirement last week, viz., separation from sin and the evil influence of false teachers. Today, we turn to the second. It's not enough to turn away from sin; the Corinthians also had to turn toward righteousness. Armed with God's promises — specifically those Paul summarized at the end of chapter 6 — they needed to perfect their holiness in the fear of God.

Sanctification is, of course, a work of God the Holy Spirit. In his second letter to Thessalonians, Paul thanked God because he had worked in them this way. He wrote, *God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth* (2 Thess. 2:13). But the fact that sanctification is the Spirit's work doesn't mean we're not responsible to live according to it. Previously, Paul admonished the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain. He wanted them to put it to use and live by it. Elsewhere he wrote, *Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure* (Phil. 2:12–13).

The first verse of today's passage adds one more thing to consider, viz., that we must pursue holiness *in the fear of God*. Fearing God doesn't mean that we feel terrorized by him, as a small child might fear the bogeyman. There's no reason for this kind of fear. His judgment against us has been averted by the blood of Jesus Christ. Rather, the fear means that we love him so much that we're terrified of disappointing him. We don't want to call into question the power of our Savior's death and resurrection. We don't want anyone to suppose that God saved us for nothing, just to abandon us later on.

Paul and the Corinthians

At first, the connection between verses 1 and 2 isn't very clear. The Corinthians were to perfect their holiness, and Paul had injured no one. How do these two ideas relate? I don't suppose anyone has ever claimed Paul was a master of literary style. He often condensed important points, leaving his readers to figure out what he didn't say. This is okay. Although the Holy Spirit used him to write

almost half of the New Testament, he didn't alter his personality. He only guaranteed that everything Paul wrote was the Word of God.

So, what do these verses have to do with each other? The context gives us a clue. In the previous chapter, Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to open their hearts to him, i.e., to reconsider his ministry, to know the power of his doctrine, to rejoice in the work that God had done through him. He wanted them to listen to him and send the false teachers packing. This is how they would perfect their holiness. But to do this, they needed to know what his ministry was like.

Paul's ministry was unimpeachable. Nothing he said or did resulted in anyone's loss. He had harmed no one, even though some might have been uneasy about how he had dealt with the incestuous man in 1 Corinthians. He hadn't exploited the Corinthians for personal enrichment, though it's possible a few misunderstood the purpose of the collection he asked for. The Corinthians had never accused him of such things, nor had anyone else except the false teachers who wanted to replace him. But Paul didn't write about his ministry in verse 2 just to counter their accusations. He wanted to prove the opposite, viz., that everything he had done — both while he was with the Corinthians and after he left — was for their good. He enriched them, improved their lives, and he did so at a great expense to himself. During the 18 months he lived there, he refused a salary but supported himself by making tents, which was pretty hard work.

The figure of speech he used here is known as litotes — affirming something by denying its opposite. We might say, for example, that so-and-so's not a bad singer, and what we mean is that so-and-so sings very well. In Psalm 51:17, David wrote, *A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.* He meant God would accept this kind of sacrifice. And in our text, Paul denied that he had injured anyone to remind the Corinthians he had helped them all.

Paul wrote this believing the Corinthians would both understand and appreciate what he meant. Look what he wrote in verse 3: *I speak not this to condemn you: for I have said before, that ye are in our hearts to die and live with you.* He wasn't criticizing them, but encouraging them to hear him again, to listen carefully to every word he spoke in Jesus' name. And he knew they would because they were already in his heart. In fact, they were so much in his heart that he was ready and willing to die and to live with them.

We find an example of this kind of loyalty in Ittai, a Philistine commander of David's army. As David fled his son Absalom, Ittai swore this oath to him: *As the LORD liveth, and as my lord the king liveth, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be* (2 Sam. 15:21).

But note Paul's change of pronouns in verse 3. In verse 2 he used *we*, but in verse 3 he used *I*. He did this to assure the Corinthians of his love. He wanted them to know he was speaking to them from his heart. He was moved by concern, not duty. He was even willing to overlook every wrong and insult that had been done to him for their sake.

And in verse 4, he added, *Great is my boldness of speech toward you*. We could translate this, "I have great confidence in you." He was so confident that he could boast about the Corinthians — not because of the work he had done among them, but because of God's work. What God had done in their lives filled him with comfort and joy, even though they had suffered together.

Paul, Titus and the Corinthians

The last three verses of this evening's text provide an example of Paul's goodwill toward the church. They involve another minister of the gospel, a man named Titus — the same man Paul wrote to in the letter that bears his name.

Titus' story goes like this. Between his first and second letters to the Corinthians, Paul had written another extremely harsh letter to them. He mentioned it in verse 8: *For though I made you sorry with a letter*. This letter was so harsh that he was concerned about how the Corinthians had received it. Since he'd heard nothing, he sent Titus to see how they were doing and report back. Afterward, Paul and Titus were to reconnect in Troas. But Titus hadn't shown up. This made Paul even more anxious. Paul wrote, *Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother: but taking my leave of them, I went from thence into Macedonia* (ch. 2:12-13).

This is where verse 5 of our text picks up. Knowing there was little chance that Titus would show up with winter coming on, Paul went to Macedonia in the spring, hoping to cross paths with him. But Titus was nowhere to be found. Paul found something, though. Verse 5 says, *For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears*. He found *fightings*, heated disputes, quarrels. He also found *fears*. He wasn't afraid of dying because he was always ready to leave this life to be with Jesus. He said to the Philippians, *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain... For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you* (Phil. 1:21-24). No, he feared what might happen to the church. Would it survive? He wrote about this fear in Galatians 4:11 — *I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain*.

The fears of the ministry are very real. Will the work we do last, or will it fall apart? To last, it must be built on the right foundation. Paul expressed this in his first letter to the Corinthians: *For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire* (ch. 3:11–15). When we build on the foundation of Jesus Christ, the work must last. Isaiah wrote, *So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it* (Isa. 55:11).

Based on these assurances of God's Word, it's no wonder Paul had such strong confidence. He believed that the Lord, who established the church in Corinth, would see it through.

Paul's confidence included even more than this. Verse 6 says *Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus*. Not knowing what was going on in Corinth and concerned about Titus not arriving as planned, Paul said that he was *cast down*, i.e., discouraged, depressed, humbled. Even the apostle wasn't immune to hardship. But as Scripture often reminds us, the Lord lifts up those who have been cast down. In Mary's Magnificat, she declared, *He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree* (Luke 1:52; cf. 1 Sam. 2:4–8). And Jesus said concerning the tax collector who humbled himself before the Lord, *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted* (Luke 18:14).

On this occasion, the Lord comforted Paul by reuniting him with Titus. The word translated *coming* in verse 6 is *παρουσία*. The Bible uses this word for Jesus' coming in glory. It literally means 'appearance' or 'presence.' The fact that Titus arrived and rejoined Paul gave him unspeakable joy.

But there's still more. Not only did Titus' coming reassure Paul of his safety, but he also brought back word about the Corinthians. He visited them as planned and looked into Paul's concerns. And what did he find? The latter half of verse 7 says that he found *earnest desire* for the truth of the gospel, *mourning* over their sin (they could hardly believe they have been so deceived?), and a *fervent mind* toward Paul and his ministry. Their zeal for the apostle Paul had been renewed.

The Corinthians had opened their hearts to Paul. At least, they began the process. So Paul concluded in verse 7 with these words: *So that I rejoiced the more*.

The Lord kept his word and fulfilled his promises. What more could Paul have asked for?

The apostle John revealed a little of his heart in his second epistle, which he wrote to *the elect lady and her children*. Some commentators believe the elect lady was an actual person who lived in the first century, while others maintain John wrote to a church, which he identified as a woman to protect it. For our purposes today, it doesn't make any difference. Whether to a mother and her children or church, John expressed his great joy for its faithfulness in verse 4: *I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father.*

As both a father and pastor, my greatest joy is seeing my children and church members walk in the truth. Trophies for debate teams and field hockey are great, but they pale in comparison. So do graduate degrees, high-paying jobs, expensive weddings and powerful positions.

The one thing we should all desire more than anything else is to see family and church living in the truth and delighting in God's grace. That's what Paul wanted for the Corinthians, and that's what he found. It gave him great delight. Amen.