

# AN APOSTOLIC VISIT

By Steve Zeisler

---

I was touched by seeing the veterans among us stand this morning recalling the history of those who have fought for this country. It strikes me, though, that the greatest dangers to this nation, even in our contemporary world, are not external threats-those that come from the military might of other nations. Those who have arrayed themselves against this country have fallen aside in many cases (for example, the Soviet Union with the changes it has experienced). Even though there are many stationed in military preparedness in the Persian Gulf today, most experts agree that the greatest danger to this country and our future comes not from Saddam Hussein or any other military force; it is much more likely to be decay from within.

We see an example of this in the Savings and Loan scandal. The federal government gave its backing to business people who were devious, incompetent, or both. Those who ought to have demanded accountability failed to do so-and the nation is greatly weakened as a result.

The same problem besets individuals as well. The lives of men and women who know and serve the Lord founder on the rocks at times because they are unwilling to be overseen by another, and no one cares enough to step forward and offer correction. I heard recently about a pastor of a small church not far from here. The pastor, a wonderful man loved by his people, had a great ministry, but in mid-life was resigning his pastorate. He was resigning because he had struggles, and there was no one to talk to. He had been set on a pedestal by his congregation and felt unable to go to any of them for help. He had nowhere else to turn. No one would lovingly come alongside and work through the problems with him, ask the hard questions, and restore him.

The subject before us this morning, as we are ending a study of 2 Corinthians, is one sown throughout the New Testament: We are members of one another, and a critical element of our oneness is that we are accountable to one another and for one another. We are to reach out and care when things are painful and difficult, when there are seductions or temptations taking place. If we lose real accountability and oneness, we can't make it as Christians. We're built to have these relationships so the Lord can speak to us through them.

Jesus told parables about stewards who were left with responsibility by their masters. In Luke 12 we read of a servant left behind in charge of his master's goods as his master goes away, saying he'll return some day.

But suppose the servant says to himself, "My master is taking a long time in coming," and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

That temptation is easy for all of us, isn't it? The Lord hasn't come back, and there don't seem to be consequences for our choices. Christian stewards are presented with an opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of sin. The offer is made and rejected perhaps the first, second, and third times . . . but the offer becomes increasingly attractive, and if no answer for our actions needs to be given, the power to resist wanes. Jesus' parable illustrates this point.

## **Paul's third visit**

In the passage before us this morning, 2 Corinthians 12:11-13:14, there are two verses I'd like to highlight before we read the rest. These two verses will serve as a framework for us. Chapter 12, verse 14:

"Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up

for their parents, but parents for their children."

And chapter 13, verse 1:

"This will be my third visit to you. Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses."

In both of these verses Paul mentions his upcoming, third trip to Corinth. Remember, the book begins with a discussion of Paul's travel plans, and his concern that they have misunderstood his reasons for not having come sooner. He returns to that subject now at the end of the book.

### **He wants the Corinthians to know that they have to be accountable for their behavior**

In chapter 12, verse 14 Paul ties his visit to the idea of a parent caring for his children. He highlights the fact that he is a parent who ought to save up for his children and meet their needs. In chapter 13, verse 1 the picture is that of a courtroom. In both cases, accountability is the subject. They are going to have to talk about difficult things. They are going to have to go through the process of seeing what's true, of rescuing those who need rescue, of dealing with real problems. For love's sake, as a loving parent and an honest judge, he wants the Corinthians believers to know that they have to be accountable for their Christian behavior.

Some of you remember being students away at college, so the thought of a parent coming to visit is one that you might easily relate to. During my own years away at college, when I knew my parents were coming to visit, everything changed. I lived with a group of men in a house not far from campus, and the place was always a mess. And I discovered in college that you can wear Levis without ever having to wash them! But when Mom and Dad were coming to visit, especially Mom, I would make a point of getting things clean, finding one shirt with a collar that I could wear when they were there, and so forth. I had a sense of accountability; I had to live to a different standard. That's what Paul is saying here; he is coming to town as a father. The two books of Corinthians are in effect the story of an adolescent church in all its willfulness, trying to interact with a father they don't understand very well.

For the last two Sundays, coincidentally, both sets of parents in our family were here visiting, my wife's parents two weeks ago and my own parents last week. They both wanted to be in church when I preached. All four of our parents are believers who love the Lord, and both fathers have been elders in their respective churches and active in their communities. They take a certain amount of satisfaction in having a son or son-in-law in the ministry, so they look forward to being here when I preach, and they like to discuss it with me afterward. It's always very positive, but there's a special awareness I have when those couples are in the congregation; I want to do well, to please them. The standards in my own mind are raised because I want them to have an experience that is appropriate and honoring to them.

There's an accountability that is going to take place for the Corinthians, as we'll see at the end of chapter 12, and the picture we're to have in mind is that of a parent coming to visit his children.

Chapter 12 verses 11-21:

I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing.

The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? Be that as it

may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course?

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

Paul is coming to Corinth, and he is afraid there may be difficulty. He wants them to understand the basis on which he is coming, which is as a loving parent who is ready to expend himself for them. He wants only their best. He has not been defending himself throughout this letter in order to promote himself. Instead, he wants to do everything to offer the best possible hope that they will receive his words as he intends, which is to strengthen and correct them, that they will respond rightly and their lives will become what they ought to be. But he realizes that when he comes as a parent it may not go well. There's still uncertainty as to how the Corinthians are going to accept being made accountable.

### **Competence, love, honesty, follow-through**

What can we draw from this section that will help us understand how to accomplish spiritual accountability well? I see four ingredients. The first one I would call competence. Not just anybody ought to be bustling around looking into other people's lives, giving advice, attempting to change their behavior, etc. Paul says, in verses 11 and following, "I ought to have been commended by you." He shouldn't have to defend himself or compare himself to the super-apostles. The Corinthians should have voluntarily and gladly received him. He is the proper person to have this responsibility. In particular, the things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders, and miracles—were done among them with great perseverance. He is saying that everything they would expect in an apostle they saw in him. The Lord had authenticated his ministry by healings, signs, and miracles, and they didn't miss out on any of that. (Now, authenticating signs always diminish in their importance; they are a beginning point that testifies as to the individual speaking. Having done that, they become less important as the character, witness, and reality of the speaker gain more importance.) He was competent to do these miracles and signs, and he was a man of great perseverance; he was willing to take all the time necessary with them. On the other hand, Paul doesn't have an ego problem of his own, and he's not a neophyte or someone without wisdom. He is not without the blessing of God. On every count he is an appropriate person to delve into the lives of the Corinthians.

The question of competence is the right question to ask. If there is going to be an examination of the life of either a church or an individual, those who take on the role of the examiner ought to be competent to do it. Not just anybody is. Brand-new Christians, for example, probably aren't in a position to give good advice or helpful counsel as those calling for accountability.

A second ingredient is that love needs to be at the heart of the relationship. When an apostle comes to his church as a father to his children and wants to know how they're doing, he needs to be an individual who loves those he is seeking to correct. It's very clear here that Paul loves these people. In verse 14 he reminds them that his unwillingness to take their money was not because he was proud or because he wanted to put them down, but because he didn't want them to be confused as to the role of money in their relationship. He didn't want them to think that their money was too important, that it could somehow sway his thinking, or that they could gain standing by the amount of money they gave. He deliberately refused to accept their money on account of their immaturity. He says, "What I want is not your possessions but you." As long as money is allowed to get in the way, they will never understand how much he loves them, how much he is willing to expend himself for them. They were so used to having spiritual leaders take from them! He says he is not defending himself; rather, he wants to strengthen and build them up. It's clear again that Paul is the right

person to hold this church accountable because he loves them very much.

The third ingredient for successful accountability is honesty. The father coming to visit his children should be an honest man. In sarcasm Paul expresses his accusers' contention that his honesty is a ploy something like the quip we hear, "Be sincere whether you mean it or not." They say he is tricking them to get their money, that although he says he doesn't want it, he's sending Titus and others to come and somehow take it from them. Paul says that's not true; he really doesn't want their money. The love is genuine, and what they have seen in him is the real Paul; he has no hidden motives beneath the surface. So if we would be in a relationship of examination, of bringing into the light difficult things, it's important to be competent, motivated by love, and honest to the core.

Lastly, he says there must be follow-through. He isn't just making noise when he raises these issues. He is going to come; this isn't an idle threat. It might be difficult. He might end up looking like a fool again because they fight against everything he has said. It might be that there will be tension as there was before. But he isn't going to fail to come for those reasons. He has a commitment to godliness, and that means he is going to come and they are going to deal with it.

### **Pride and pleasure**

Now, we could sum up the issues that gripped the hearts of the Corinthians with the words pride and pleasure. They were easily overtaken by their own pride. They loved to argue, they were jealous, and they fought over their standing and self-promotion all the time. Listen to this series of words. "I fear there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder." (Verse 20.) All of these are manifestations of human pride. The Corinthians' pride was very close to the surface, and they easily gave way to it. Paul says they are going to have to deal with it because pride is ugly; it is at the heart of rebellion against God. The other issue he remembers from their past and, unfortunately, their present, is pleasure: ". . . many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery..." Love of pleasure was also very close to the surface for the Corinthians. They got drunk at communion, for instance. They found it easy to give way to sexual sin, to visit prostitutes.

So Paul says, like a good accountant who is going to look over the books of one of our Savings and Loan associations, that he is not going to just tell them to be honest and then walk away. He's going to tell them to be honest and then look at the books. They are going to be accountable, to be nothing less than really Christian.

I've seen occasions when Leslie and I tell our children to do family chores. A couple of times we have been gone for a weekend and said to them, "When we get back, those chores need to be finished." Now when in the course of the weekend do you suppose energy was expended to get the work done? If we were to return at 3:30, at 3:00 they would charge into action. There's something about follow-through that's important. If you just say, "Do it," but there's never any accounting, then nothing gets done. I used to do the same thing with term papers in school. I would never do them until the last minute. There has to be a deadline, doesn't there? We never quite get around to doing something just because it's the right thing to do; it's the fact of the deadline that makes us face things. Paul is saying there is a deadline; the deadline is when he comes.

In this first section of the passage before us, we have been speaking of Christian accountability. We are saying that real Christianity means you are not your own; you are bought with a price. Our behavior ought to reflect godliness: not just externals, but heart and reality, humility, willingness to turn aside from sin, and choosing to allow Christlikeness to be formed in us. That's what ought to be taking place. And, ultimately, the only way for us to grow as we ought is to have accountability among believers. Those who have walked with the Lord long enough and are wise enough, who love and are honest, and who follow through need to engage in the business of helping younger Christians face themselves.

**Paul's purpose is to get them to do the work of self-examination**

### **Witnesses in court**

The second section takes up the same issue but uses a courtroom as a visual aid. Chapter 13 verses 1-10:

This will be my third visit to you. Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you--unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority---the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

The third visit is imminent. Paul says, using legal language, "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." He is saying that each of his visits in effect will serve as a separate witness. He will have come three different times, and each time he is there as a witness to what is taking place. Each time he sees things as they are, so they can't fool themselves.

There are some things we can say very briefly about this section, the courtroom drama, as well. First of all, he warns them not to let weakness misinform them. Jesus was weak, but he was raised by his Father and now rules in power. Paul has also come in weakness, to be sure, without lordly, human dominance. But they should not mistake weakness for lack of authority. When the issues are brought out in court as they must be, proper decisions will be made, however difficult, without compromise.

The point he makes in verses 7 through 10 is that he is not doing this for himself. He is not calling the court into session because he wants to trumpet himself, because he looks forward to ruling with an iron hand, or because he wants to pronounce negative sentences. He would be glad to look like a fool. There's no sense in which the court is being called into session to promote the judge, the witnesses, or anyone else. It's being called into session because the Corinthians need the accountability.

## **Self-examination**

The most important verse in this whole section is verse 5. If there is to be real accountability, what should be the response of the one who knows his life has to be answered for? "Examine yourselves . . . ." Before anyone else has to come examine you, examine yourself; look at your own life. Weigh your own behavior against your beliefs. Be hard with yourself. Ask if there is deception going on. Maybe you've inadvertently slid into practices you don't like, but you have to admit they are there if you're ever going to change them. Maybe you've become proud and hard to live with, and people are turned off by your behavior. Maybe without knowing it you have lowered the defenses against an old habit, and all of a sudden the wall has been breached, and it's been too hard to admit it.

Paul is coming a third time to Corinth. He's coming as a father, and he's coming as though to a courtroom. But before he comes and before the accountability is to take place, the Corinthians themselves could do the hard work of seeing what's there. "Examine yourselves . . . Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you...?" That's the point---it's Jesus' name that is at stake. It's his proclamation of himself that is taking place in them. They are the jars of clay; he is the treasure within. Does the life they are living line up with their identity as someone in whom Christ dwells? Paul's whole purpose here, in this final reminder that he is coming a third time, is to get them to do the work of self-examination. If they will do it, he will come and agree with them that

they have repented, and he will encourage them to be strong, to stand on their feet, to build up the walls of defense again, to tell the truth to themselves and other people again, to shuck off the phony leadership that has told them tales that aren't true. "Examine yourself" is the key to all of this.

He ends the book on a wonderful note (verses 11-14):

Finally, brothers, good-by. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

This is the benediction of a loving father. He says to mend their ways, to aim for perfection, and to listen to the important appeal he is making to them. But he wants them to know it's the God of peace who is appealing to them. It's the fellowship of the Spirit, greetings from abroad, and his love for them. He says to greet one another in love, to put back together real Christianity. It's not an antagonist who is going to hold them to account, but a lover of their souls. He wants them to take seriously what he says, but he wants them to know he is coming as their brother, friend, and loving father.

In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul gives his readers a warning:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

These are the options we have, aren't they? We have the option of real accountability, in which the veterans who have fought the good fight and served the Lord, who have grown wise, competent, loving, and guileless, ask the hard questions and encourage Christ to be formed in us. Or we can gather for ourselves spokesmen who will tell us what we want to hear, "Christian" authorities who with all their erudition help us sin more freely, disguising our foolishness for us.

Paul is saying he is coming a third time because he cares, because the truth must be honored, and because he wants Christ to be formed within them. He appeals to us to examine ourselves, and having made the examination, to be about the business of correction in love.

---

Catalog No. 4234  
2 Cor.12:11-13:14  
Twentieth Message  
Steve Zeisler  
November 11, 1990

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.