

“Last Chance”

Matthew 5:38-40 • 2 Corinthians 13:1-14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • March 6, 2022

This morning we have reached the end of our study of Second Corinthians and chapter thirteen is really Paul’s summary and conclusion of everything he has said in this letter. He begins by repeating that he is planning to go visit Corinth for a third time. The first time he went was his year-and-a-half-long stay when he established the church there. You can read about that in Acts 18. Corinth was a prosperous, modern city with a wide variety of people living there – retired Roman soldiers, freed slaves, merchants, and a large Jewish population, Corinth was very much an entertainment and sports culture. In many ways it was similar to our culture today.

The church had grown and thrived as the people came to believe in Jesus. But, much like today, they had a hard time letting go of some of their cultural ideas and actions, things that are contrary to the gospel. The struggle, much like we see in churches and society today, involved status, power, and sex. While he was gone things had not gone well. So Paul returned to try to get the church back on track. That visit, which he calls the “painful visit,” also did not go well and he had to leave before someone got hurt. That led his detractors to say that he was weak and that he wasn’t even a legitimate apostle.

The reality is that Paul appeared weak by Corinthian standards because he loved them so much he didn’t want them to get hurt. That’s why he wrote this letter, so they would have an opportunity to repent and turn back to Christ. And that’s why we have been studying Second Corinthians. So you and I have the same opportunity to reflect on where we have been more like the world than like Jesus and then repent.

Now Paul says he’s coming to them a third time. He then says, “Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” This was common law at the time. What he’s saying is that his visits are those witnesses. This visit will be the third witness testifying about their wrong actions. He is

warning them that when he comes this time he will have to deal with the unrepentant sinners. No more warnings. They accused Paul of being weak. He’s saying that he will be carrying out Christ’s work when he comes, and that Jesus is not weak, but “powerful among you.”

But the surprising thing for the Corinthians and honestly for us as well is that Jesus’ power is not what we think of when we think of power. His power doesn’t come from strength but from weakness and the evidence is the crucifixion and resurrection. “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.” The irony is that by pointing out Paul’s weaknesses as the reasons to reject his authority, they were actually rejecting Christ who had come in weakness.

Too often, even in the church, I think we fall for the world’s understanding of power and authority. We tend to look for strength and believe it’s demonstrated by leaders who are dynamic, efficient, and charismatic. We think that wealth or social position is a good indication of strength. We want to know what kind of car someone drives or what brand of clothes people wear.

Jesus never held a position of authority. He was never wealthy. He didn’t wear designer sandals. As far as we know he didn’t even own a car, although he did say, “I do not speak of my own accord.” Instead he was rejected by his own people, arrested and falsely accused, beaten, spit upon, humiliated, and then crucified. According to the world’s standards, Jesus was utterly weak. But that weakness was actually the strength of God. As one commentator put it, “Only an all-powerful God could be strong enough to live out the weakness of the cross.” His true weakness was that he took on human flesh and then suffered for your sins and mine. He then experienced the greatest weakness of all times – death. But when he walked out of the tomb on the third day, Jesus showed us that what we thought was weakness was actually God’s power and strength.

The point here in Second Corinthians 13 is that you and I are to live the same way. We are to embrace our own weakness because when we reach the end of ourselves we find God at work. This is what Paul means when he says, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." He is challenging the Corinthians to look at their own lives and see if God is at work there. Because if they find that Jesus is in their lives, then they are the living proof of Paul's apostleship. He is the one that introduced them to Christ!

Today you and I are challenged by the same question: Is Jesus Christ in you? Examine yourself. Test yourself. How do you know if Christ is in you? Is there proof of Jesus in *your* life? The fact that you are here today, or watching online, *might* be evidence that Christ is in you. But the question is not whether you go to church but *why* you go. Are you here to show off your new outfit? Or are you here to humbly worship Jesus? Are you making an effort to connect with other believers for fellowship and encouragement? Are you growing in your faith by frequently spending time with God, reading the Bible, thinking about how it applies to your life, and praying? Are you looking for ways to humbly serve others – both in the church and in the community? And are you inviting people to know Jesus for themselves? Finally, are you willing to appear weak for Jesus' sake so that His strength and power are visible?

First John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Jesus demonstrated real strength when he loved us enough to give his life for us. Paul showed the Corinthians the same kind of love. You and I are called to love God enough to love other people sacrificially. The amazing thing is that when you do that, you will find great strength in it. When you willingly sacrifice for others you discover that you no longer have to worry about them taking advantage of you. They can't because you have already given yourself fully to them. Nobody can take from you something you've already

given away. When all of us begin to live like that it changes us individually, it changes our church, and it changes the world.

Paul concludes this letter with short, rapid-fire admonitions to demonstrate that Jesus is in fact at work in us. He begins by saying, "rejoice." If there is one thing that should mark all followers of Jesus it is joy. As C.S. Lewis famously said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." We should be known for our rejoicing. If you don't experience that kind of deep joy, try to figure out why. Ask God to change your heart and fill you with His joy.

Next, he says, "Aim for restoration." As we see in this chapter and throughout the whole book, the purpose of any kind of discipline should not be punishment but restoration. Verse 9 says, "Your restoration is what we pray for." Then in verse 10, "For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down." It's hard work but as followers of Jesus we need to also build up and not tear down. As we sacrificially give ourselves to others, even people we don't like, we build bridges that restore relationships and leads us to comfort one another, agree with one another, and live in peace. When we do that with other people, the God of love and peace promises to be with us. The whole point is that since the church is like a family, we are to live and love like it.

Finally, the letter ends with that great benediction that we use at the end of most of our worship services: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." That truly is my prayer for each of you, that you would experience the grace of Jesus who lived and died and rose again so you could have a relationship with him. By knowing Christ I pray that you would know overwhelming love of God the Father, and that you would experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you, confirming God's truth in your heart.

Amen.