

2 Corinthians 12:10

For Christ's Sake — The Signs of an Apostle — Gifts Considered

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:10–21

“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong. I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended of you, for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds. For what is it wherein ye were inferior to other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong.

Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be burdensome to you; for I seek not yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved.

But be it so, I did not burden you; nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you? I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make a gain of you? Walked we not in the same spirit? Walked we not in the same steps?

Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? We speak before God in Christ; but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying. For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not; lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults.

And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they have committed.”

For Christ’s Sake

There is a fairly rare expression in verse 10: for Christ’s sake. It is rare in the Scriptures, and it is correspondingly rare in the thoughts and hearts of people. Yet what a deliverance it is from the tyranny of self and from the oppression of circumstances. Of all the reasons why people do things and behave as they do, how much happier life would be if there was something that was simply for Christ’s sake. It is a very happy expression.

The infirmities and weaknesses of verse 10 are not sinful tendencies, nor the weakness of failures. They are the weaknesses of human limitation — human capability at its natural boundary. And these are valued because they are opportunities to receive the Lord’s ministration. What a list to put alongside the remarkably diligent service of the apostle Paul. A boastful person would have listed his strength, his capacity, his energy, his diligence, his strength of mind — which would have sounded very much like, I thank thee God that I am not like other men. But in fact, as this verse shows, he was like other men in his human limitations. And this is what he was boasting in: infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions, and distresses. Five things — the number of man’s weakness. Yet in all his service, how blessed of God he was. We have so many of the New Testament epistles that came from his pen, like little love letters from heaven.

The giving passage in 2 Corinthians 8:12 is instructive here: “For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.” A man has human limitations; but if he has a willing mind, his gift is accepted according to what he has. The woman who gave the two mites

had done what she could; the Lord said she had done more than they all. It is the quality of what is given. But this cuts the other way too — there is no justification for poor quality under the cover of having a willing mind. The man in Christ, with his human limitations and his infirmities and difficulties, also needs a willing mind. And then it works out for Christ's glory. As the hymn says: "To all our prayers and praises, Christ adds his sweet perfume."

Reproaches, Necessities, and Wants

Darby has insults for reproaches — an instructive rendering, because insults are something the natural man reports and reacts to. Necessities — there were needs in the apostle's service; there were times when he was quite hungry. Persecutions, and distresses — straits, pressed in on all sides. At one point he said he despaired even of life. All these things were for Christ's sake. And he says he takes pleasure in them. When speaking of the elect in 2 Timothy, he says he endures all things for the sake of the elect, that they may obtain salvation. But here it is for Christ's sake, and he takes pleasure in them. The object — Christ — gives a significantly different perspective on their value.

There is a distinction between necessities and desires, between needs and wants. The English word want has two senses: the older sense of an absence or lack, and the more common sense of a covetous longing. The apostle did not take pleasure in his wants in the latter sense. He could say to the Philippians, when they sent him a gift, "I have all things in full supply and abound" — an overflow. If he had had a covetous heart, the gift would not have matched his desires, like the horse leech's daughters who never say it is enough. But he said it was an overflow. He had Christ. Christ to him was everything, and he had counted everything else but loss for Christ, as we get in Philippians. So in his service it was the power of Christ that was the energy operative through the Spirit, rather than human capability or ability.

We would do better to take pleasure in necessities — in needs themselves, not merely in their fulfilment. If the Lord has set before a person some work to do for him, he will meet those needs, for he is over all and behind all. But if he does not send anything to meet a particular need, that may be a sign that that work was not one he had set for that person to do. He knew all about the resources one was counting on, and had the opportunity to bring in what was needed from his vast stores. The fact that he did not is itself a message. That is a hard lesson for the flesh to learn.

When I Am Weak, Then Am I Strong

Exodus 13:18 records that the children of Israel went up out of Egypt harnessed — or as Darby renders it, five in a rank. And similarly in Joshua 1:14 and 4:12, when they passed over Jordan into the land, they also went five in a rank. Five is the number of man's weakness. Whether coming out of Egypt or going into the land, it was not in their own strength. They had to learn that they had no strength in themselves: it was the Lord's hand only that could save them. When I am weak, then am I strong — that is not merely a formula, it is the lesson of the entire wilderness journey.

The principle is the same whether expressed by a man who naturally had little capacity, or by a man like the apostle Paul who, naturally speaking, had a very great deal to bring to the table. The principle is identical, but it is the more remarkable in the case of one who by nature was a very great man, and who yet counted it all as loss so that Christ might be manifested. That was exactly what the Corinthians needed in the way of a good example — someone who counted as loss all those worldly and fleshly advantages, for whom Christ was everything, so that when they got to the bottom line of their own account they could say: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

I Ought to Have Been Commended of You

How did the Corinthians compel him to this foolish glorying? By their need for a good example. These people needed to hear these things; they needed a concrete, specific, personal example of what it means to be a man in Christ. He says, I ought to have been commended of you. There are many things the Corinthians could have said: that he came and preached the gospel and they were saved; that he wrote when they were in great trouble and it met their need right then. But perhaps the simplest thing they could have said, looking at the end of verse 15 — “though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved” — is this: we love him. That is one of the things to learn about a man in Christ, and about the new creation: it is the place where love is. God is love, and that characterizes the whole of the new creation. The apostle could have said, I ought to have been loved by you.

The Signs of an Apostle — Four Things

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds. In Darby’s version, where the word in appears only once, these four things are strung together: all patience, signs, wonders, mighty deeds. And the count is not five but four. There is something to consider in that number. If one had to assign each of the four Gospels to one word, one might link patience with Luke — where the Lord told his disciples to possess their souls in patience. And signs with Matthew, which is more characterized by fulfillment of prophecy and the establishment of credentials. And wonders, the great wonder of God come down, with John. And mighty deeds, the Gospel of deeds, with Mark. So these four things add up to something: they are not four disjointed items; together they speak of Christ himself displayed — not merely Paul having lived before them, but Christ manifested through him.

It is also remarkable that patience is put first. One might put it last, as the moral quality that sustained everything. But Paul puts it first — and no doubt the

Corinthians' situation called for it, because the flesh was working strongly there and he stayed with them a long time, a year and a half. All patience. The moral quality comes first, and then the three words that speak of what we call miraculous powers: signs, wonders, mighty deeds. These three words are used in 2 Thessalonians 2 also, of the one who will come with all lying wonders — an imitation from the flesh in the service of the Antichrist. There the powers are not from God; here they were the genuine thing, and the Corinthians had the evidence fully before them. How excuseless they were for the attitude they showed toward the apostle Paul.

The Sign Gifts and Apostolic Power

The Corinthians had among them what are sometimes called sign gifts to distinguish them from gifts which abide in the church. As 1 Corinthians 13 indicates, tongues shall cease — and indeed they have ceased, despite all claims to the contrary today. But the gifts of prophecy and knowledge continue, though in a more restricted sense. When God said to Moses that Aaron would be his prophet — his mouthpiece, the one who would speak his words before Pharaoh — we get the core thought of the prophet: the mouthpiece of another. In that sense, the gift of prophecy continues, and we should believe so, otherwise it would be an inconsistency to conduct meetings on the basis of “let two or three prophets speak.” It is the specific aspect of fresh revelation that has passed off; the bringing to bear of the mind of God upon present conditions continues.

It is a considered judgment that the sign gifts were given immediately through apostolic power. Peter could communicate the Holy Spirit by apostolic power, and so could Paul — as seen in Acts 19. Paul also communicated a gift to Timothy by the imposition of his hands, the elderhood merely identifying themselves with it in fellowship. No one else but an apostle could communicate a gift; there is no record of it. This bears directly on what the apostle says in verse 12: “The signs of an apostle were wrought among you.” If those at Corinth had

received sign gifts through the apostle Paul's ministry, as is the judgment here, then they had the evidence very plainly before them of his apostleship, and their questioning of it was utterly excuseless. They were dependent upon him for their very salvation, in a sense, because the Spirit of God sent him to them in the first place. "Since ye seek a proof of Christ speaking in me— examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith." If they were in the faith, there was the proof.

Not Burdensome — The Gospel Free of Charge

The charge of verse 13 is made with a very sharp edge: what is it wherein the Corinthians were inferior to other churches, except that Paul himself was not burdensome to them? In Darby's translation, not burdensome is rendered as not in laziness a charge. Forgive me this wrong. That ought to have called up their consciences and brought them to consider where their real complaint lay.

The apostle's habitual behaviour was that he labored night and day, supporting himself by his trade as a tent-maker, as well as those who were with him, so as to make the gospel free when he preached it — without collection, without making a profit off his audiences. This is an apostolic example with a bearing right down to the present time. There are always arguments in favour of fleshly methods of fundraising — that times have changed, that nothing would get done otherwise, that all these resources are needed. But the fleshly methods have tended to swamp out the divine method. There are those who preach the gospel without taking collections, following the apostolic practice, and they have no notoriety. The big fanfare seems to win the race and get over the finish line first. But there is someone watching the race, and that one does not crown the man who cuts across the track. A person has to count on God in service; when one counts on the arm of flesh and all its methods, that gives character to what is being done, and corrupted results follow. That is ever the tendency of the flesh — to set aside the divine order.

For when I am weak, then am I strong.