

We are continuing in our study in 2 Corinthians and Paul's case against the false teachers as he tries to get the Corinthian believers to see through their deceptive teaching and false accusations. The previous passage shared the many ways in which Paul suffered for the sake of the gospel and how his weakness made way for Christ's power. We saw that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6ⁱ).

ⁱⁱ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. 2 Corinthians 12:11 If Paul is not inferior to the super-apostles and at the same time is nothing, what does that say about them? Paul reiterates here for the fifth time that this effort of comparing ourselves with others is foolish (2 Corinthians 10:12ⁱⁱ). He felt he was forced to do so because the Corinthians were listening to the false teachers boast of how they were superior to Paul. Instead of speaking up for their founder and telling of all the godly qualities they had seen in him, they allowed themselves to be persuaded by the skilled rhetoric of those men.

Having now "foolishly" shared his credentials with those of the false teachers, Paul can declare that the Corinthians were duped into missing the fact that Paul was not at all inferior to these men whom he sarcastically calls "super apostles." I think Paul did not say he was superior to them because Paul knew all men are sinners. We all fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23ⁱⁱⁱ).

"Even though I am nothing!" Here is the balance of sharing what God has accomplished in us and what we are without him. It is putting things in perspective. Christ is all! It is as Paul wrote, *"Not to think of yourselves more highly than you ought, but to judge with a sober judgement"* (Romans 12:3^{iv}). We are nothing; Jesus is all. But wonder of wonders, He invites us to work with Him as He works through us (1 Corinthians 15:10^v). We do not deny what He has done, but we do not boast as if we are the ones who did it. All glory goes to Him, for He alone is worthy. Then when we read that He will share His glory with us, we are rightly overwhelmed with the wonder of His love and grace (2 Thessalonians 2:14^{vi}).

"I am nothing!" That is the beginning of wisdom. Just as the Corinthians had so underestimated Paul, in a much greater way we underestimate God and His wonders all around us. You and I are just dust (Psalm 103:14^{vii}). As Doctor Mayo of Mayo clinic humorously described what we consist of: "enough potassium for one shot of a toy cannon, enough fat for seven bars of soap, enough iron for a medium sized nail, enough sulfur to delouse a dog, enough lime to whitewash a chicken coop, enough magnesium for one dose of medicine, enough phosphorous for a few boxes of matches."^{viii} If we could harvest all that from our remains, it would not fill two grocery bags. But we are much more than that. We are made in God's likeness (Genesis 1:27^{ix}). We have incredible potential. But without God, we are all just dirt. **Our value lies in the fact that God has set His love upon us** and given us a soul that has the freedom to reject Him or yield to Him. Even to yield to Him must start with Him graciously moving in our hearts.

This need to recognize how helpless we are without Him is illustrated in a number of Bible accounts. When Moses and the Israelites were standing before the Red Sea and the army of Pharaoh was bearing down on them, the Israelites were whining about being brought out into the wilderness to die. ¹³ *And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”* Exodus 14:13,14 Quit your belly aching and watch God work! A similar situation happened when an innumerable coalition came to attack Judah and a prophet told King Jehoshaphat and the nation (2 Chronicles 20:12^x). ¹⁵ *And he said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, ‘Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s. ¹⁷ You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’* 2 Chronicles 20:15,17a When they went into battle, Jehoshaphat put the priests in front of his army to sing praises to God. Crazy? No, that is faith and realization that we are nothing and God is all. No wonder God spoke through the psalmist saying, “Be still, and know that I am God!” Psalm 46:10a

There is a greater army ready to attack us, Satan and his legions. We can only be still and have faith in what God did for us on the cross. So, I am asking us, who are each about 2 boxes of matches, 5 bars of soap, bag of sulfur, lime, iron, magnesium, and phosphorous, what is your true value? It is that the Lord has set His love upon you (Deuteronomy 7:7,8^{xi})!

¹² *The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.* 2 Corinthians 12:12 The false teachers apparently did not have any signs that confirmed their authority. The reason God worked signs and wonders through the apostles was to convince the world that truth had been revealed in Jesus Christ. It was the evidence that they were truly God’s ambassadors. That is why those miracles were done in His name. That is why signs and wonders are still done in areas steeped in animism or Islam or any faith that needs to be exposed as powerless (Deuteronomy 26:8^{xii}). The first time “signs and wonders” are mentioned in Scripture is the Lord telling Moses how He would deliver the Israelites from Egypt. Every plague exposed an Egyptian god to really be a curse. That is why a great number of Egyptians left with the Israelites (Exodus 12:38^{xiii}).

In Corinth, the Greek and Roman gods were exposed as powerless when signs and wonders were done through Paul. Paul says these were performed with utmost patience. I believe that means that God is patient with our refusal to hear and believe. Jesus said that an evil and adulterous generation seeks after signs (Matthew 12:39^{xiv}). But God is patient with us. I believe He gives everyone whatever we need to be convinced that He alone is Lord (John 1:9^{xv}; Acts 10:34^{xvi}). But many will still reject Him.

A Pharisee named Nicodemus told Jesus, “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.*” John 3:2b Yet all but one of the other members of the Sanhedrin voted to have him executed (Mark 14:64^{xvii})! The signs that Jesus displayed were predicted to be the works of the coming Messiah. The ruling council of Israel were religious leaders who knew Jesus was

fulfilling those predictions, and yet, they chose their positions and power over the God they claimed they were worshiping with all their strict religious routines. The signs they saw and the Scriptures they knew will only serve to condemn those who chose what the world offers over Jesus. I believe it is often the mercy of God that there are not more miracles seen, as people who choose not to believe would be even more accountable. Remember that Jesus told the three cities He did the most ministry in that if Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom had seen what they saw they would have repented (Matthew 11:20-24^{xviii}).

¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! 2 Corinthians 12:13 In writing that Corinth was not “less favored than the rest of the churches” Paul is saying that signs, wonders, and mighty works in Corinth were at least as frequent as in other cities where Paul started churches. Yet, we read of very few of these incidents. We read of a demon cast out in Philippi which resulted in Paul and Silas being imprisoned (Acts 16:18^{xix}, 23^{xx}). We read that he healed a lame man in Lystra and was worshiped as a god, but then a few days later Paul was stoned by the same people (Acts 14:8^{xxi}, 19^{xxii}). And there is the sweat cloth of Paul that was taken and reported to cure many people and driven out demons of those who touched it (Acts 19:12^{xxiii}). But the expression in this verse means miracles and healings were a frequent occurrence during the founding of most churches. Why is that not reported? It is because it is not the main thing. As wonderful and exciting as signs and wonders are, the main thing is the transformation of lives and establishing a beachhead for the kingdom of God in each city where the gospel is proclaimed.

In our culture, if there is a miracle or healing, that is all people talk about. That may give us a clue as to why we do not see it happen more often. I have witnessed instantaneous healing, but I have also later seen a person who was healed later pass on to glory. The healing was for the greater miracle of the person placing their faith in God and becoming a new creation. The signs and wonders in Egypt were to open the eyes of the Egyptians to the true God, but also to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, which is a picture of every individual who comes out of the world system into the kingdom of God. The miracles led to the greater miracle of the exodus. If there is no change in the heart after seeing a miracle, we are only more accountable on the day of judgment.

The last part of the verse is Paul apologizing for not asking for support. “*I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!*” It is an example of having to choose the best over the good. We are often presented with alternatives that are all good, but when we listen to the Lord, we can discern what is best. Paul’s choice to support himself exposed the false teachers who were demanding support.

And yet, that choice caused the church to miss out on the blessing of supporting the ministry. When we contribute to a ministry, we are a part of that ministry and will be rewarded for the fruit that comes from it. Jesus said, *⁴¹ The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. ⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.*” Matthew 10:41,42 Paul did not let them have the blessing and reward of contributing to his ministry. He surely did

that at the leading of the Holy Spirit which resulted in exposing his critics and enabling the church to see his sincerity. It was also an example of working hard to contribute to others' needs (Ephesians 4:28^{xxiv}). The only way we can know the best choice when presented with many good options is to pray and get the Lord's leading.

¹⁴ Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. 2 Corinthians 12:14 Paul spent a year and a half with the new church in Corinth. He returned for a short contentious visit. In this verse he promises another visit. During his visit he promises to not be a burden. I think he is referring to his commitment not to receive any funds from them for his travel and ministry as he adds that he is not seeking what is theirs but them. Unlike the false teachers, he does not care about how they can benefit him. He is like a father to them, and good parents do not care what their children can do for them, but what they can do for their children. Parents want to see their children become successful and able to stand on their own. That is Paul's desire for the church of Corinth, but the false teachers want the Corinthians to be dependent on them.

The Great Commission is to make disciples, and disciples are those who learn of Jesus and tell others about Him (Matthew 28:19,20^{xxv}). We want those whom we disciple to grow to stand on their own relationship with the Lord and knowledge of His Word. False teachers and cult leaders want their followers to depend on them. Paul will visit them again for their spiritual maturity. He seeks their good and nothing for himself but faithful service to His Lord.

¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? 2 Corinthians 12:15 Paul is expressing the heart of God, who loves us enough to see His Son suffer and die for our salvation. There is no greater love (John 15:13^{xxvi}). He was glad to work long hours for their sakes. He was willing to pour out his life for them. They witnessed his dedication and heart for them. And we witness the heart of Jesus for us when we look at His life, death, and resurrection. He gladly let His life be spent for the salvation of our souls (Hebrews 12:2^{xxvii}).

We exist to receive the gracious, overwhelming love of God. Love begets love (1 John 4:19^{xxviii}). The more we receive it the more we love Him. We can avoid that love because we know if our love for Him increases, we will prefer what He wants. That is why we sometimes avoid prayer that lets Him speak to our hearts. Husbands, if you want your wife to love you more, see that your love for her increases.

Paul asks if for some reason that is not the case with the Corinthians. Does his love for them not produce love in their hearts for him? Does it cause them to love him less? That would be unnatural, but I have personally witnessed this. Yet, I know it is not personal, but rather the allurements of the world that when heeded results in a spirit of criticism to justify rejecting God's love. That is because we do not want to give up being our own lord.

¹⁶ But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. ¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? 2 Corinthians 12:16,17 The counter by the false teachers to Paul's dedication and commitment to the believers was to say that he really was after something, and all that dedication was really trickery to gain an advantage over them. They were suggesting that he

was making them feel indebted to him. But if that was the case, what did Paul or any of his team get from that indebtedness except to serve them even more. Sometimes asking a question as to exactly what is meant clarifies the issue.

¹⁸ I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? 2 Corinthians 12:18 Titus went with another brother to collect the offering for the Jerusalem church. That would assure nothing would be used personally and that Paul would not handle the money. Paul asks if Titus called in that indebtedness Paul supposedly earned by his sacrificial service to them. Paul knew he did not because Paul knew Titus' heart. He did not send the brother with him because he doubted Titus but to abstain from any appearance of possible misconduct (1 Timothy 3:2^{xxix}).

Then Paul asks if he and his team did not act in the same manner. He may be referring to his last visit. Again, Paul knows he never gained anything but fellowship from them. He is asking them to put the testimony of his life with them alongside the false claims of the “super-apostles.”

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. 2 Corinthians 12:19 Paul is certainly defending himself against the claims of the false teachers, but not for his sake or for them to think highly of him. Paul's purpose is that before God and in Christ he shares what God would have him share for their upbuilding. It is for their sake, not his reputation. It is to build them up, not him. Which is another complete contrast with the false teachers. Why do unbelievers project on others what they are guilty of? It is because they are convicted about their own behavior and believe everyone else must be guilty of the same.

In our passage today we have seen that recognizing we are nothing is the way to real strength, as it causes us to depend on the strength of the Lord. We saw that being small and seemingly insignificant invites the power of God so that He gets all the glory. We saw that miracles are not a priority, and that choosing the best over the good takes discernment and prayer. And finally, we saw the integrity and sacrificial spirit of those who serve God, putting others ahead of themselves because they truly believe it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35^{xxx}).

Questions:

- 1 Why would Paul say he is nothing?
- 2 What is the balance between not thinking too highly of ourselves and thinking soberly?
- 3 What are we?
- 4 What Bible accounts tell of God using the weak?
5. Wherein lies our true value?
- 6 Why were the signs of a true apostle signs, and wonders, and mighty works?
- 7 What were two purposes of signs and wonders in Egypt?
- 8 How do we know the best over the good?
- 9 Who does a godly leader want disciples to depend on?
- 10 Go over the main points in the passage.

ⁱ **James 4:6 (ESV)**

⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

ⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 10:12 (KJV)**

¹² For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Romans 3:23 (KJV)**

²³ For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

^{iv} **Romans 12:3 (ESV)**

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

^v **1 Corinthians 15:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

^{vi} **2 Thessalonians 2:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{vii} **Psalms 103:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

^{viii} Vett and Malone, *Inspired Evidence*, p. June 22

^{ix} **Genesis 1:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

^x **2 Chronicles 20:12 (ESV)**

¹² O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

^{xi} **Deuteronomy 7:7-8 (ESV)**

⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

^{xii} **Deuteronomy 26:8 (ESV)**

⁸ And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders.

^{xiii} **Exodus 12:38 (ESV)**

³⁸ A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.

^{xiv} **Matthew 12:39 (ESV)**

³⁹ But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

^{xv} **John 1:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

^{xvi} **Acts 10:34-35 (ESV)**

³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

^{xvii} **Mark 14:64 (ESV)**

⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death.

^{xviii} **Matthew 11:20-24 (ESV)**

²⁰ Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. ²³ And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

^{xix} **Acts 16:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

^{xx} **Acts 16:23 (ESV)**

²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.

^{xxi} **Acts 14:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked.

^{xxii} **Acts 14:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.

^{xxiii} **Acts 19:12 (ESV)**

¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

^{xxiv} **Ephesians 4:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

^{xxv} **Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

^{xxvi} **John 15:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

^{xxvii} **Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**

² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

^{xxviii} **1 John 4:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

^{xxix} **1 Timothy 3:2 (ESV)**

² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

^{xxx} **Acts 20:35 (ESV)**

³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”