

In the previous section Paul had addressed the false teacher's claim of Paul being weak. Paul claimed that when we are weak, Christ can be our strength. God's power is perfected in weakness. Thinking we are strong enough in ourselves is pride that God will not use. Paul was warning the Corinthians his next visit may demonstrate that strength.

²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. 2 Corinthians 12:20 The Apostle Paul has written most of this third letter to the Corinthians to defend his role as the apostle to the Gentiles and founder of the church. He has contrasted the signs of an apostle and his suffering with that of the false teachers to expose their deceptive tactics for personal gain. In our passage for today, he writes of an upcoming third visit to Corinth with a tone of warning, hoping that they will change their behavior before he arrives. His fears and concerns for them also authenticate his authority and reveal his pastor's heart.

Philip Brooks over a century ago described the heart of an elder. *To be a true minister to men is always to accept new happiness and new distress. ... The man who gives himself to other men can never be a wholly sad man; but no more can he be a man of unclouded gladness. To him shall come with every deeper consecration a before untasted joy, but in the same cup shall be mixed a sorrow that it was beyond his power to feel before.*ⁱ Paul shares the heart of God for the Corinthians. Like a father not wanting to cause his children pain, he fears it may be necessary to discipline them (2 Corinthians 11:28ⁱⁱ; 3 John 1:4ⁱⁱⁱ).

Paul addresses two fears about his upcoming visit. The first is that the fruit of the false teachers may still be evident within the congregation. The list includes a number of the fruits of the flesh Paul listed in Galatians 5:19-21^{iv}. Quarreling, probably over the teachings of the false teachers, jealousy over who is the most spiritual, anger toward those who disagree to the point of hostility, slander, gossip, and conceit over one's title in the church or ecstatic experiences, all which result in disorder. In the first letter to the Corinthians Paul instructed them that the worship services should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40^v). That would be the product of preferring one another and exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit. Disorder is the result of the fruit of the flesh as everyone wants to lead and have their way. No one is preferring one another in love (Romans 12:10^{vi}; Philippians 2:3^{vii}). If that is the case, they will find him not as they wish. Paul will need to do some serious reprimanding and spend a long time there helping them get back to walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16^{viii}). His time away has given them time to repent. This letter is a final warning that the time to repent and not face the discipline of the Lord is drawing to a close.

Paul knows the Lord can exercise severe discipline through him. He had seen the Lord pronounce through him the judgment that blinded Elymas the magician in Cypress (Acts 13:11^{ix}). Surely there were other times that are not recorded.

²¹ I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced. 2 Corinthians 12:21 Paul's second fear was that God would humble him before them, mourning over those

whose sins he addressed in the first letter (1 Corinthians 5:1^x). If the person's repentance was not genuine and he was continuing to live in sexual immorality and sensuality, Paul would once again, with tears, have to banish him from the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:4,5^{xi}). That would mean, as before, handing him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh so his spirit might be saved. Last time, God had mercy on him, and he was welcomed back in fellowship. If it happened again, it could very well mean his death. Paul would mourn over such a situation. His broken heart and tears would humble him before the congregation.

There was a serious fear of God in the early church. Ananias and Sapphira died because they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11^{xii}). Others fell ill for treating communion with selfish disregard for the rest of the believers (1 Corinthians 11:29,30^{xiii}). I think we need to return to the seriousness of what it means to worship together. We need the fear of the Lord, for He does discipline those He loves (Hebrews 12:6^{xiv}). We become ill and not consider that it might be the Lord's discipline. That means we may need something more serious to get our attention. We blow off conviction and go our way until God stops us in our tracks with a warning or an affliction or a broken relationship. He can bring us to our knees for our good. They would not like the discipline Paul would bring or to see him brokenhearted. Paul hoped to find them as he wished, receptive to his instructions from the Holy Spirit, walking in the Spirit, rejecting both pride and the false teachers. He wanted to find them in unity and loving one another.

This heart of a true pastor that deeply longed to see the spiritual maturity of those he disciplined, while being ready to be the Lord's instrument for discipline which would be delivered through tears was also a contrast with the false teachers. Paul's heart was devoted to the Lord and thus to the flock as well. They were a reason for his overwhelming joy and his grieving heart.

¹ This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 2 Corinthians 13:1 The first time Paul was in Corinth was when he founded the church, staying a year and a half with them (Acts 18:11^{xv}). The second was a short and very contentious visit, so much so that Paul left to give the Holy Spirit time to convict them of their ingratitude and disrespect. Paul warns them that on the third visit the Lord may use him to discipline them. Accusations would only be accepted if two or three people were united in the accusation. The one being accused had a right to face his accusers. That was the guideline given in Scripture (Deuteronomy 19:15^{xvi}). That keeps an individual from making claims against someone they personally do not like. It confirms the accuracy of what someone thought they witnessed. Most spiritual leaders do not like contention and confrontation. Requiring two or three witnesses reduces the chance of false accusations and makes it easier to assess the situation. Paul was not in the least fearful for himself, but for how God might deal with them.

² I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—^{3a} since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. 2 Corinthians 13:2,3a In that second visit, Paul had warned those who publicly behaved in the manner listed in verse 20, those who were quarreling, slandering, gossiping out of conceit. He probably warned them that God would deal with them so the whole congregation would recognize their sin

and not follow their behavior. In this verse he says he is giving them written notice that if they have not repented and changed their ways, he will not spare them. By that he certainly means that he will not hold back the discipline the Lord prompts him to render.

Paul had not only put the immoral brother out of the church of Corinth, but he had also removed Hymenaeus and Alexander from fellowship and turned them over to Satan for blaspheming (1 Timothy 1:20^{xvii}). Paul had experienced the Lord disciplining errant believers through him. The thought ends in the first part of verse three, “*since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.*” He knew of his authority to discipline, which he apparently used only against those who hindered the hearing of the gospel or misleading the flock. There was also the case with the fortune teller of Philippi forcibly expelled at Paul’s command (Acts 16:18^{xviii}). Paul surely knew of the case of Ananias and Sapphira who were struck dead for lying to the Holy Spirit. He knew some of the Corinthians died for treating the Lord’s Supper with contempt. This was a serious warning that Paul was giving. It was not to be taken lightly.

In case you might think that was just back then, let me relate my own experience. Twenty years ago, there was a brother in the church who had some influence. The church had sold a piece of property that was donated and was planning on updating the sanctuary with windows and changing the choir loft into a platform for a worship team and changing the roof structure that leaked with every heavy rainfall. The carpet and pews had a very dated color and were worn. The elders and admin board were in agreement, and we were going to present it to the congregation for a vote.

The man came to talk to the elders to tell us we were out of line, and he was going to let everyone know the job could not be done for the cost we were voting on. He was going to do everything he could to disrupt the vote to keep us from making the changes. The very night before the meeting, he had a triple bypass and of course could not come to the meeting. The work was completed on budget. Mission giving was not reduced, and in fact we gave even more. At his bedside I asked if the Lord was speaking to him about the experience. His answer was an emphatic, “No!” I wept for the hardness of his heart. Was it a coincidence that his heart was giving out that night before the meeting. I have no doubt it was God’s discipline and intervention. It taught me the fear of the Lord is a good thing to keep us from having to face severe discipline. God blessed us with a work crew led by a member who did a beautiful job within budget.

Our aim is to glorify God with how we spend the resources that come from generous hearts. If the building is not maintained, the guest who is seeking the Lord will wonder if we really care that much about honoring our Lord. If salaries are way above the average, it causes doubt about our integrity. If our finances are not presented each year to the congregation and audited, it also gives room for questioning the sincerity of our faith.

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 2 Corinthians 13:3b God dealt powerfully with those who did not consider their poor brothers and sisters when it came to communion, eating the best before they arrived and leaving them scraps. While taking lightly the sacrifice of Jesus’ body on our behalf, they also took lightly the body of Christ that makes up the church. Some even died as a judgment (1 Corinthians 11:29,30^{xix}). That is God being powerful among them. We think of God being powerful to heal and provide, and He is, but He is also powerful to discipline those who would ruin the testimony of a body of believers, or those who would lead them astray by

distorting the Word of God. The church in Corinth needed to understand that God's judgments had taken place among them, which should have resulted in them having a greater reverence for the Lord. He had acted powerfully among them. They had seen the miraculous signs of an apostle and God's judgments on some in the congregation, and yet they were swayed by the smooth talk of the false teachers.

Paul is trying to open their eyes with this stern warning. He does not want to see God discipline them even more than He already has. We must know that the power of God will deal with us as well. **We, too, should have that healthy fear of the Lord.** It is like a father who disciplines the child whom He loves. Thankfully, as far as I am aware there is no present need for that kind of discipline in this church. Jesus is your source of joy and peace. You desire to love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourselves. That gives me great joy. But as we will see in verse five, we should always examine ourselves, to see whether we are in the faith. Backsliding is often a gradual withdrawal from time in fellowship, prayer, and the Word.

⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. 2 Corinthians 13:4 The tone here is also one of warning. The false teachers were saying Paul's presence was weak. That is because he was so gentle. Paul's response was that when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9,10^{xx}). When he leans fully on the Lord, God's power is perfected in him, resting upon him the like tabernacle in which the Shekinah was the manifest presence of God.

Paul employs the ultimate example in Christ on the cross. Jesus' physical body was so abused He could not physically resist if He tried. But Jesus did not trust in physical strength. Physical strength did not raise Him from death.

Physicists have looked at the Shroud of Turin and the 3D negative image on it and concluded that the image was made by immense power. They could not recreate it because there is no present way for man to create that much power. When Paul writes that Jesus was raised by the power of God, we should realize that is more power than we can fathom. Look at the contrast: Jesus broken body surrendered to death followed by that explosion of power that raised Him.

Paul is writing that this is the same with his team. Note again the use of the plural "we." His team was weak from the world's perspective, but in dealing with the church they live with the resurrected Jesus and that immeasurable power. What a picture! What a warning! I have no doubt if there were those who still would not hear the message of warning, they may very well have faced the same fate as Ananias and Sapphira. They might drop dead as warning to others. If I was one of those false teachers, having witnessed the apostolic miracles, I would be shaking in my sandals and repenting.

I am so thankful that your elders are humble men who do not seek followers but desire to see you follow Jesus. We point to Him. And may the Lord discipline us if we seek people to follow us rather than our Lord and Savior. None of us feel we are worthy of the office, but we know God has called us by His grace.

We have seen five of our members go on to glory in the past six months. I want to make sure you do not think that I am speaking of any of them. They had lived full lives and were growing in their faith. It had nothing to do with discipline. God has numbered our days (Job 14:5^{xxi}). He knows the best time to take us home. It always seems too early

to us, but that is because we cannot see what God sees. It was their time to graduate into His presence, free from earthly pain and sorrow. That power that raised Jesus will one day raise the dust that was their bodies and transform it into an eternal dwelling like His (Philippians 3:21^{xxii}).

I am going to conclude the message with the same verse with which I will begin next week's message. ⁵ *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.* 2 Corinthians 13:5a After such stern warnings, Paul tells them and us what we need to do. The Greek is in the imperative active, meaning "right now we must scrutinize ourselves." Are you in the faith? I recently saw a special on the fall of the pastor of a megachurch. It was from a secular perspective, but the facts were discernable. The pastor was the CEO. He was not part of a team of elders. He spent money extravagantly. While most of what he said was biblical, he added the damnable prosperity doctrine: Jesus wants to make you rich. While he preached purity, he gave-in to his lusts. One of the witnesses justified her sin by pointing to his. People attended for years without having a personal relationship with Jesus. So many attendees were not in the faith.

Are you in the faith? What does that mean? It means have you trusted Jesus to forgive your sins and made Him the Lord of your life. People like to hear the first part about forgiveness, but not that thing about Him being Lord over our lives. Do you look to Him for direction? Do run to Him for forgiveness when you fail (1 John 1:9^{xxiii})? Are you asking for a hunger for His Word and spending time in it? Most of all, is Jesus first in your life? Is He the reason you live? Do you seek to glorify Him in all you do? Are you longing for His return (Revelation 1:7^{xxiv})?

This was Paul's challenge to the Corinthians. Was the bad fruit he had witnessed a temporary fall forward, or were they not truly in the faith? They needed to know if Christ was in them or not. It is one or the other. Do you have a relationship with Christ, or do you just enjoy the people and the feeling you get when you attend. Fellowship is very important, and God's children will desire it. But fellowship without Christ in us is meaningless. And if you find you are not in the faith, know that God is a righteous judge. Repent and receive Him as the Lord of your life, be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38^{xxv}). Live daily to know Him better. Be assured that Christ is in you and that He will perfect that which He has started in you (Philippians 1:6^{xxvi}; 1 John 5:13^{xxvii}).

Questions:

- 1 What is the experience of a true elder?
- 2 What fruits did Paul fear he would find?
- 3 What was Paul's second fear?
- 4 Give examples of severe judgment in the early church?
- 5 Does it still happen in our day? Why?
- 6 How had God sternly judged some of them in the past? Why?
- 7 Why is a fear of the Lord spiritually healthy?
- 8 What kind of power was Paul talking about?
- 9 Why do we need to examine ourselves?
- 10 How do we do that and how often?

ⁱ R. Kent Hughes, [2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 222. Quoting Philip Brooks

ⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 11:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

ⁱⁱⁱ **3 John 1:4 (ESV)**

⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

^{iv} **Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

^v **1 Corinthians 14:40 (ESV)**

⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order.

^{vi} **Romans 12:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

^{vii} **Philippians 2:3 (ESV)**

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

^{viii} **Galatians 5:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

^{ix} **Acts 13:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

^x **1 Corinthians 5:1 (ESV)**

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

^{xi} **1 Corinthians 5:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

^{xii} **Acts 5:3 (ESV)**

³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?"

^{xiii} **1 Corinthians 11:29-30 (ESV)**

²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

^{xiv} **Hebrews 12:6 (ESV)**

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

^{xv} **Acts 18:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

^{xvi} **Deuteronomy 19:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.

^{xvii} **1 Timothy 1:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

^{xviii} **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.

^{xix} **1 Corinthians 11:29-30 (ESV)**

²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

^{xx} **2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (ESV)**

⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ,

then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

^{xxi} **Job 14:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass,

^{xxii} **Philippians 3:21 (ESV)**

²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

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

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

^{xxiv} **Revelation 1:7 (ESV)**

⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

^{xxv} **Acts 2:38 (ESV)**

³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

^{xxvi} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

^{xxvii} **1 John 5:13 (ESV)**

¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.