

Week 14, 2 Corinthians 12:11–21

Hook



Main Point: True Christian leadership exhibits sacrifice and godly fear.

Current Event: How much do you have left in the tank? Gas tanks in America read “E” well before the tank is truly empty; click the following link to find a chart that lists the 50 best-selling vehicles of 2015 and the number of miles those vehicles can travel on “E” (link: <http://www.roadandtrack.com/car-culture/a30762/how-far-drive-empty-gas/>).

Why would manufacturers design their products to indicate that the vehicles are empty when there is still gas in the tank? According to an *ABC News* article, three manufacturers supply their reasoning:

Ford – to provide a comfort zone for drivers

GM – to give customers the reserve they truly want

Chrysler – unlike other countries, American consumers like to have a buffer

Do you typically wait until you see the “E” indicator to refuel your vehicle?

In what areas of your life do you “refuel” before you actually need to (e.g., I shorten my workouts, I take more breaks at work).

What leaders in your life seem to truly empty themselves for their followers, giving everything they have?

Transition: In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul will reveal that he has sacrificed much for the Corinthians because of his love for them.

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Book

Main Point: True Christian leadership exhibits sacrifice and godly fear.

Text Summary: 2 Corinthians 12:11–21 After ending his satirical, boastful speech, Paul takes one final run at authenticating his apostleship in this text.¹ To help the Corinthians return to a model of legitimate Christian leadership, Paul offers three markers for true apostleship and maintains that his ministry exhibits all three.

2 Corinthians 12: 11–18 [Read]

Sub-Point: True Christian leadership is marked by signs and sacrifice.

Verses 11–12 Now that Paul’s “fool’s speech” is virtually over, he reminds the Corinthians a final time that it was something done in great reluctance and coercion. Paul wants to ensure that his readers understand that he felt forced into parading his Hebrew pedigree and rapture into paradise. Indeed, he only employed the use of such rhetoric to gain their ear in the only way they would hear him and eventually pull them out of skeptical silence and into loyal defense of his ministry.²

Paul refocuses his attempt to get his enemies to acknowledge his authenticity as a true apostle.³ He does this in three waves: first, his authenticity is proven by apostolic *signs* (vv. 11–12). Second, by apostolic *sacrifice* (vv. 13–18). Third, by apostolic *fears* (vv. 19–21).⁴

Apostolic signs (vv. 11–12) “Signs, wonders, and miracles (or mighty works)” do not refer to three *types* of miracles, but miracles in *general* examined from three angles. First, “signs” denotes their ability to authenticate the message paired alongside the miracle. Second, “wonders” refers to the ability the miracles had to evoke awe. Third, “mighty deeds (or works)” indicates the miracle’s ability to display divine power.⁵

“Signs and wonders” is a well-known Old Testament expression for the exodus experience where God brought the deliverance and salvation of His people. “Mighty works” is a New Testament expression used for miracles. The Gospel message about Christ crucified and risen

¹ R Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 218.

² Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longeman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 535.

³ Hughes, 218.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 218-223.

⁵ Harris, 535.

offers a new covenant exodus from sin.⁶

For the Corinthians, a true apostle must have accompanying signs that prove his message is divinely authenticated. Paul defends that he has this by the bucket-load. What's more, he has performed these signs "with utmost patience," (v. 12) which translates as "with all perseverance and endurance." This phrase reminds us that Paul not only performed the signs required to authenticate his ministry but he did so amidst incessant beatings, shipwrecks, dangers, and pastoral afflictions. While the false apostles may have claimed to produce "signs and wonders" as Paul did, they did not demonstrate the kind of fortitude that Paul did as he experienced persecution.

Why is a Christian's character just as important as his mighty ministry?

Apostolic sacrifice (vv. 13–15) This is the second way Paul's apostleship is proven. Paul turns up his use of irony in verse 13, and his tone is reproachful and sarcastic. "Forgive me for working to support myself so that I would not be a financial burden to you. Forgive me for attempting to do good to you. Forgive my selfless sacrifice!"⁷ Paul is not afraid to show his raw emotions.

But Paul does not stay in this tone for long as we see the next section transition from sarcastic irony to true tenderness.⁸ Verses 14–15 reveal the idyllic standard for all ministers of the Gospel and disciples of Christ: to seek the person rather than their stuff, and the desire to be totally spent for the sake of another.

"I seek not what is yours, but you" (v. 14) is an intentional shot at his opponents, the false apostles who manipulatively lived off the Corinthians. In contrast, Paul is saying he does not desire their money, but he desires for their very souls to know and love Christ; this reflects the heart of Paul, the spiritual father of the Corinthians.

On top of simply not taking their money, Paul goes even further to say he "will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls" (v. 15). Instead of merely refusing for them to spend their money on him, Paul desires to instead spend all he has—body, soul, money and message—on them!

Paul's commitment to the way of Christ shines brightly in these verses, as he desires not for their hands to serve him, but to serve them and offer himself up for their good (Mark 10:45). Paul's heart toward sacrifice is a clear indicator that his apostleship is real in contrast to the greedy and selfish false apostles.⁹

⁶ Hughes, 218-219.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hughes, 219-220.

While the false apostles draw much attention to their alleged signs and wonders, fortitude and sacrifice are clearly missing components of their ministry. Any believer ministering at any level in the church should consider Paul's example as the true model for Christian service and leadership. Showy spectacles can indeed be used by God to minister to people, but without true love, concern and sacrifice, church leaders amount to nothing more than the false apostles.

What "fatherly" qualities do you see in the way Paul ministers to and interacts with the Corinthians?

What barriers prevent you from "spending yourself" this way to those you minister?

Verses 16–18 Despite a clear heart for the Corinthians and actions that backed his character, it appears the false apostles had alleged that Paul's refusal to accept financial support from them was a crafty front to throw the people off of his true greedy nature. These allegations are intended to cast a shadow on Paul's intentions for the offering he is collecting for the church at Jerusalem.¹⁰ Paul asks: where is the evidence to support such claims? Did Titus or "the brother" do or say anything that might lead to the credibility of such allegations of deceit?

If you were Paul, how would you have responded to such baseless claims?

What steps did Paul take to be above reproach in the area of money? What safeguards have you developed in your life to ensure that you are above reproach in your finances?

2 Corinthians 12:19–21 [Read]

Sub-Point: True leadership is also marked by godly fear for the wayward.

Verse 19 On top of the signs and the sacrifices he has exhibited in his ministry, Paul adds now that *his fears* are a third form of apostolic authentication.¹¹ Paul anticipated that some of the Corinthians would assume his letter was merely a catty, defensive and self-serving attempt to defend his ministry. While he did spend portions of his letter defending his apostleship, he wants to assure the Corinthians that his intentions had very little to do with his personal issues and much more to do with their health and edification as a church (v. 19). He only defended his ministry in order to bring them back to theological soundness, otherwise, their entire church would be founded on a false gospel propagated by false apostles. The acceptance of his true apostleship was tied to the very health and longevity of their faith. Paul reassures them when it comes to his Corinthian correspondence: Everything he wrote was ultimately for *their*

¹⁰ David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 584.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

strengthening, not his (v. 19).¹²

According to v. 19, in front of whom does Paul say his message and ministry is ultimately performed? Why should this reassure the Corinthians?

When was the last time you had to do something unpleasant for the well-being of someone else?

Verses 20–21 Paul's fears in these verses are threefold:¹³ first, he fears mutual disappointment and embarrassment when he arrives (v. 20a). When he gets there, Paul himself could be disappointed and embarrassed by the church's relentless questioning of his apostleship and inability to repent of sin. And the Corinthians would also be disappointed and embarrassed by the vigorous church discipline he would have to exercise for all the churches nearby to see. Second, Paul fears that Corinth's particular sins have been so established that they will still be present and growing when he arrives (v. 20b). Third, he fears that that Corinth will have to undergo a second bout of the humiliation they experienced under God's hand due to the non-repentant group in their midst during Paul's second visit to them (v. 21, cf. 2:1). This group had unashamedly preferred the teaching of false apostles and publicly refused to repent of blatant sexual sins. Paul grieves at the possibility that he may have to watch them go through a second round of God's discipline.

Paul's fears for the Corinthians flow from an aching pastoral heart. He does not stare down at them from an ivory tower in snobbish anger, but looks on them with paternal eyes filled with grief. Since he considered himself their spiritual father, Paul simply could not forsake them even in yet *another* round of chaos, discord and rebellion. In his steadfast commitment and love for the Corinthians, Paul chose to endure a horrific index of fears unknown to the uncommitted heart. As he had hitched his very life to Corinth, he now had no other choice than to ride the ups and downs of their journey with them.¹⁴ Paul pictures for us a final marker for an authentic Christian leader: one who bears the weight of godly fear for the wayward in his care.

What is your usual response to the unrepentant in your church or in the media? How has Paul's example challenged your usual response?

To whom in your life are you so committed that you would endure extreme frustration (as Paul did) for that person's betterment?

¹² Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, revised ed., vol. 8, *2 Corinthians: an Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 274.

¹³ Harris, 538-539.

¹⁴ Hughes, 222.

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Took



Main Point: True Christian leadership exhibits sacrifice and godly fear.

Group Activity: In 2014 the *Washington Post* surveyed 162 members of the American Political Science Association's Presidents & Executive Politics section and asked them to rate the presidents. Below are the five presidents who topped the rankings:

1. Lincoln
2. Washington
3. F. Roosevelt
4. T. Roosevelt
5. Jefferson

What character qualities in these presidents made them great leaders?

After reading 2 Corinthians 12, what character qualities in Paul make him a great leader?

Lesson Conclusion: While we do not live in the age of the apostles, Paul teaches us much about the heart of a Christian leader. From our pulpits to our lay-leadership, believers must hold to the standards that Paul sets out for us. First, leaders must show signs of God's work in their life. Second, leaders must exhibit sacrificial character. And third, leaders must exhibit godly fear for the wayward in their life. While the world offers many types of leaders, a Christian must demonstrate all three of these to warrant leadership within the Church.

Challenge

Identify your strengths/weaknesses. All Christians have the ability to become leaders in their church and in their spheres of influence. Which of the three marks of a Christian leader do you consider a strength of yours? A weakness? Perhaps you have a charismatic personality and a booming ministry history, but you are unwilling to sacrifice your time and money for those you lead. Perhaps those you minister to frustrate you when you have to give more than they are giving. If that's the case, you may struggle more with *sacrifice* than *signs*. In another example, perhaps you sacrifice often for those in your ministry, but when they get off track, your

response is annoyance and selfish anger instead of godly grief. Do you get frustrated with the wayward because they make your life harder, or because they are missing out on God? If the former is true, perhaps you are strong at *sacrifice* but weak in exhibiting *godly fear* for the unrepentant. Identify your strengths and weaknesses as it relates to these verses.

Make a plan to develop where you're weakest. If Paul still held out hope for the Corinthians to change, surely through God's strength, we can change, too! With another believer or leader you trust, brainstorm how you can move forward in your weakest characteristic. To follow our earlier example of the person struggling with *sacrifice*, perhaps you can make a clear plan this month/year to give up more of your time, energy or resources to those in your care. In what ways can you sacrifice comfort to minister like Paul? Or, if you are weak in godly fear, perhaps you can start a prayer plan to start praying for those who are wayward instead of harboring pent-up irritation. It's very hard to stay angry at a person you are praying for daily, so create a prayer plan to get started. These are just examples, so make sure to ask others for ways to move forward in your weakness.

Thank God for those who have led you well. As we finish this chapter, we realize just how much effort and love goes into being a true Christian leader. Take some time to reflect upon your life as a believer. Who has led you well? First, pray and thank God that He orchestrated this person to minister to you. Second, reach out: write a letter to this person, make a phone call, or send an e-mail. Let him or her know just how impactful his/her investment has been on your life.