**A pastor’s patience and perseverance** 24/4/22 dkm

Read: Acts 3, 2Corinthians 12

Text: 2Corinthians 12:11-19

Psalms: 9:7-14, 75, 143:1-4 & 8b-12, 134

The apostle Paul came to the city of Corinth on his second missionary journey. He stayed eighteen months, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and, by the grace of God, a church was established. His first letter, written some five years after this, reveals a division in this church over personalities like Apollos, Peter, and Paul. But these men were all preaching Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Those who for their own purposes wanted to split a church are sure to find some cause for division.

Furthermore, some in this church were slipping back into pagan ways regarding sexuality and idolatry. Paul had taught, and also shown them how to live and behave as believers in Christ. They had received the Holy Spirit when they believed, and he expected them to ‘grow up in all things into Christ who is the head’ (Eph 4:15). He expected them to show appreciation for his ministry among them even if it was some years before. Paul boasted in them and he expected them to boast in him (1:14).

But in the intervening years, false teachers had come to Corinth from in Judea, men teaching a ‘different gospel’ about ‘another Jesus’ (11:4). Satan is always trying to attack the church, so we must be alert to his devices (2:11). The Corinthians were not alert; they listened to these intruders in their midst, so much so that they turned against the apostle Paul. They criticised Paul for changing his travel plan, criticised him for not accepting a preaching fee, and joined the intruders in calling him a weak little man whose speech was contemptible (10:10). Nothing hurts a parent more than when their own child criticises them in public and wants to be free from them. It was one thing for the false teachers to be commending themselves with letters and the like, but another for this church to be accepting such self-commendations, and not responding by commending their father in the faith, the apostle Paul.

As Paul draws this, his second letter to a close, so he concludes the boasting he was compelled to engage in in defence of his ministry and the gospel he preached. His boasting was largely about his weaknesses and his suffering as a servant of Christ. He sought to imitate Christ, and he urged the Christians to imitate him, not the self-appointed and self-commending ‘super-apostles’ who came to Corinth. Our subheadings are: ‘Signs of an apostle’, ‘Spend and be spent’, and, ‘Speak before God in Christ’.

**1. Signs of an apostle**

Paul was called by the risen Lord Jesus to preach the gospel, not to talk about himself or defend himself as a preacher of the gospel. But when the gospel itself was under threat, as was the case with the false teachers at Corinth, Paul was compelled to defend himself and the gospel he preached. He was very reluctant to boast in personal attributes or in what he had done. He was not an eloquent speaker but he was not lacking in knowledge; he was an educated ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ (11:6, 22). When it came to ministry, he reflected on the suffering and distress he endured for Christ’s sake and for the church.

None of this foolish boasting would have been necessary, of course, if the church had stood behind Paul when the false teachers started attacking his credentials and person (12:11). Paul urges them even now, to see that he was in no way inferior to these puffed up ‘super-apostles’ (11:5, 12:11). Paul called himself ‘the least of the apostles’ because he persecuted the church (1Cor 15:9), meaning the twelve apostles, not these self-appointed ‘blow-ins’. They were full of words but short on substance, more politician than preacher. Besides, did not Jesus say, ‘The last will be first and the first last’ and, ‘Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Mat 18:3, 20:16).

The ministry of the apostle Paul was accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles, the ‘signs of an apostle’ (12:12 NIV). At Lystra he healed a cripple, just as Peter and John did at the temple (Acts 14:10). There is no record of miracles done through Paul at Corinth, but he says that ‘the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you’ (12:12). They are not recorded because Paul’s ministry was not simply a ‘signs and wonders’ ministry; it was a gospel ministry, a ministry calling for repentance and belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The apostolic age has passed so ‘the signs of an apostle’ are no longer seen. In any case, the key word in the miracles of Jesus and the apostles is ‘signs’. Signs point to something- they are not meant to be an end in themselves (Heb 2:3, 4). In the words of Calvin, ‘Signs are not empty shows, but are appointed for the instruction of mankind; wonders, because they ought, by their novelty, to arouse men and strike them with astonishment; and mighty deeds, because they are more signal tokens of divine power than what we behold in the ordinary course of nature’.

And let us not overlook the word ‘perseverance’, ‘all perseverance’ or ‘great perseverance’ here in verse 12. Paul did not enter the city of Corinth like a celebrity and start performing miracles. He came alone and started working as a tentmaker, while preaching in the synagogue that Jesus is the Christ. He was thrown out of the synagogue but kept on preaching. The Jews later dragged him before a Roman court. Perseverance marked Paul’s ministry more than miracles.

Paul’s failure to visit this church as planned, and his refusal to accept a preaching fee, had been misconstrued as evidence that he loved the Corinthian church less than other churches. But this was not true. Paul has already pointed out why he changed his plans, and why he did not accept a fee, but would they listen and accept his word? Since when was it a sin to refuse financial help! (11:7, 12:13). Paul can do no more than sarcastically ask them to, ‘Forgive me this wrong!’ Paul saw the hands of his detractors, the hands of the false teachers, behind all this twisting of the truth.

**2. Spend and be spent**

Paul decided not to burden the Corinthians by asking for support, even though he was entitled to do so (1Cor 9:9). He had not burdened them in the past, and would not burden them in the future. What did the future hold? Paul was planning to make a third visit to Corinth. He may have changed his initial plans because of a hasty retreat from Ephesus, but he still intended to come, and quite soon: ‘I am ready to come to you’ (12:14).

Paul tries to put the money matter to rest by pointing out that it is not for children to support their parents but for parents to support their children (12:14). Although entitled to support, he did not want their money: ‘I do not seek yours, but you’ (12:14). What he wanted was for them to mature in their faith and to become adults, as it were. As their father in the faith he would gladly ‘spend and be spent for your souls’. Paul would give whatever he had, be it money, possessions or time, in order to see them grow in their faith. He would run himself into the ground, worrying and praying, writing letters and visiting, for the joy of seeing them mature in the faith.

Paul was disappointed that his demonstrations of love for the Corinthians had been twisted and turned back on him. It seemed to Paul that the more he loved them, the less they loved him. They were like ungrateful children. They were a disappointment to Paul, and also to Christ whom they believed in when Paul preached the gospel in Corinth. They had been given the Holy Spirit when they believed but there was little evidence of the Spirit’s work in their lives at this time. The fruits of the Spirit were sadly lacking in their conduct towards their true apostle.

For a third time in just four verses, Paul stresses that he did not demand a preaching fee from the Corinthians because he did not want to burden them (11:7). His conduct was in contrast to the money-hungry false teachers; hence their slander concerning his motives for not accepting a fee, and the rumour that he was taking from the collection being conducted by Titus. They were charging Paul with being ‘crafty’ and ‘cunning’, accepting no fee but in fact dipping into the funds they were giving for the poor brethren in Judea. This charge was so ridiculous that the apostle sarcastically replies, ‘Crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery’ (12:16).

To have dipped into this collection would have required the complicity of those in charge of it, namely Titus and another brother (12:18, 8:17, 18). Paul was careful to send two men, the second being the choice of the churches, not his choice, as we saw back in chapter 8. Besides, Titus was well-known to the Corinthians. He had carried Paul’s severe letter to them, and had brought a good word back to Paul from that visit (7:6, 7). Titus loved the Corinthians as much as Paul (7:15, 8:16). Titus was a brother who imitated Paul, just as Paul imitated Christ (1Cor 11:1). He was a man of faith who was faithful to his calling in Christ Jesus, and loyal to the brethren. Paul challenges them with three rhetorical questions concerning the character of Titus (12:18). He was Paul’s friend and colleague, but, like Paul, was first and foremost the friend and servant of Jesus Christ.

**3. Speak before God in Christ**

Many scholars see verse 19 as beginning the next section of this letter, but we see it as a fitting conclusion to this section. You will note a different reading in some translations, but Paul’s point is clear. The boasting which they compelled him to engage in was not about making excuses, not about self-vindication, and not even about defending himself. Paul did not see the false teachers as his judges, and nor was the church his ultimate judge. Back in his first letter he declared that the Lord was his judge, not a human court and not even himself (1Cor 4:3, 4).

Paul concludes a ‘defence’ of his conduct by declaring, ‘We speak before God in Christ’ (12:19). The ‘we’ may be a royal ‘we’, may include Timothy as co-author of this letter, or may include Titus whom he just referred to. Paul was concerned all along, and indeed all the time, to be speaking the truth because he was speaking ‘before God in Christ’. All that we say is heard by God, and we will be called by Christ to account for every word on the Day of Judgment (Mat 12:36). To be speaking what is not true about a servant of Christ is tantamount to speaking against Christ. The Corinthians would do well to consider this! But Paul is referring to himself, and possibly his colleagues in saying, ‘We speak before God in Christ’. He declares that he is being honest before God in everything he says. God is his judge, not man.

The Corinthians were not his judges, but they were his ‘beloved’: ‘We do all things, beloved, for your edification’ (12:19). Paul was not trying to win a ‘war of words’ with the Corinthian Christians. The only winner he wanted to see was Christ. He wanted to see them walking closer to Christ or exalted in Christ. All that Paul said and did was for their edification, for the strengthening or building up of the brothers and sisters in Corinth, to the glory of Christ.

It would have been very easy for Paul to take all their accusations to heart and focus on personal vindication, or even revenge. But as a man imitating Christ, this was not the way. He would put up with being called a weak little man, a ‘nobody’ in the eyes of the world, but he would defend his honesty because any dishonesty on his part would undermine the gospel. But ultimately, he would ‘speak before God in Christ’, and persevere in loving them and doing all he could to strengthen them in their most precious faith.