

Sad Love Letter to Wandering Christians

2 Cor 12:11-21

Turn to 2 Corinthians 12 please. This part of 2 Corinthians is like a sad love letter to wandering Christians. A good number of the Corinthian believers are not following the Lord, and they have decided that Paul is not worth hearing. He's nothing. And they seem comfortable with their behaviour, toward the Lord and toward Paul.

Do you have people in your life like that? They are believers, or at least they say they are, but they regularly do things that the Lord was clear we should avoid. These people are content to carry on like this, don't see any problem. Let's suppose you love them. They don't seem to think they are in trouble, but you know they are. How do we love people like that?

We are all different, and every situation is different, so I do not mean we shall all do exactly what Paul did. But I do mean that we can get a feel for how he handled this painful situation, and we can see what is important to the Lord.

Because, make no mistake, the Lord was loving that church through Paul, through the Lord was writing a sad love letter to a wandering part of his bride. God's love for those wandering believers comes through this all.

We'll begin at 12:11. At 12:10, Paul ended his fool's speech. Paul was giving them reasons why they should listen to him, and he could hardly stand to do that, it was too close to bragging, it was foolish, and not the Lord's way. 12:11 is his first sentence after the fool's speech ended.

2 Cor 12:11 – Sad Footnote to Fool's Speech. *I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing.*

You can feel that Paul has been hurt by them. He started that church. See Acts 18. He preached the gospel in Corinth, they trusted in Christ, they were saved, and the Holy Spirit came on them.

God used Paul to bring them to himself. And now, after all this, they don't think Paul's a real minister of Christ at all, or at best a weak and pitiful servant of Christ. They don't think he has anything important to say to them, and he has to defend himself so he can restore them to Christ.

They should be defending him to the doubters. But they themselves doubt him. It is a sad line. You love people, and they walk away from you and from the Lord. Loving wandering believers is hard. But Paul will not walk away from the Corinthians, because the Lord still loves them.

12:12 The Marks of an Apostle. *I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.*

Paul defended his genuineness as a servant of Christ throughout this letter. He's had four lists of his troubles and weaknesses, and his pure motives. About 45 verses of that, all told. 45 verses of troubles and weaknesses, and clean motives. The last list was the fool's speech, just over.

After all that, he has one verse on miracles. One sentence about his signs, wonders, and miracles. He does mention them, sort of an afterthought when the important discussions are all over.

Paul as much as says, "the miracles don't prove very much about me, but if they matter to you, at least remember that God's power was present for these signs." (And these many miracles did NOT take away his weaknesses or troubles or suffering.)

12:13-18 Paul, his Children, and Corinthian Money

¹³ How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong! ¹⁴ Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? ¹⁶ Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! ¹⁷ Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?

In the Corinthian church, people seem to have been saying that Paul does not treat them as well as he treats other churches. Paul has no idea why anyone would say that. Except this, that he would not take any money from that church.

Part way through his second missionary journey, Paul stopped taking money from his audience. We've talked about this before. He started supporting himself by making tents. He keep saying that people who devote themselves to speaking God's words have a right to receive food and needs from their audience. Jesus himself said these workers were worthy of their hire.

But Paul would not do that anymore. It caused some kind of trouble or misunderstanding. He would, however, take money from a church somewhere else that sent it to him. But not from his audience. Not from the Corinthians. And the Corinthians managed to be insulted by this. He does all he can to not burden them, and they manage to be offended at him, think he's insulting them.

Forgive me for not being a burden to you, he says. He's hurt and frustrated, but will not insult them. I don't want you money or belongings, he says, I want YOU!

After all, children don't make sure they have enough money to help their parents, no, parents make sure they have enough to help their children. Paul did not have biological children, but these believers feel to him like his children.

Paul would gladly spend every cent he has to help them be strong in the Lord. He would spend himself, he would use up his last bit of life on them, to help them be strong in the Lord.

If I love you more, will you love me less? For Paul, not taking their money, not burdening them, but rather spending his own money to help them in their faith, all showed his love for them. Now it seems that the more he loves them, the less they love him. He can hardly believe it. This is a sad love letter to wandering Christians.

You and I cannot pursue every believing friend that wanders away from the Lord. It is impossible. We could never keep up. But through Paul, the Lord himself is telling us today how he feels about such people, how he the Lord loves them, and how he is hurt by what they are doing but he still loves them and spends himself on them.

12:16b-18 Paul's trick. *Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! ¹⁷ Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?*

How Paul tricked them is hard to figure out. Commentators are not sure. But I've read this over, and this is the only way I can see it working:

Paul's enemies in Corinth said this to the church – "Paul did not take your money, true, but wait until Titus and his other messengers get here. They will take your money, and bring it back to Paul. Paul says he won't take your money, but he will get it that way."

How did Paul catch them? How did he trick them? He made sure Titus did not take any money either. He gave clear instructions to his delegates that they shall accept no money from the Corinthians, and they did not. He caught them in their suspicions by proving himself innocent.

12:19 Why Paul Defends Himself. *Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, beloved friends, is for your strengthening.*

Paul has been defending himself, that is certainly true. Why? Does Paul simply want the Corinthians to respect him again the way they used to? NO! That is NOT why he does this. *Everything we do, beloved friends, is for your strengthening.* Everything is to build you up in your faith. Everything is so that you would be the pure and devoted bride of Christ.

He loves them the way parents love a child that is not living well, and will soon be in all kinds of trouble, if they aren't already. He wants to restore their love and devotion to Christ, and he defends himself so they will listen to him, and he can build them up in their faith.

12:20-21 – The Corinthian's Sins. We will go over these last two verses twice. First, we'll pay attention to the sins that are in that church, and then I will show you some other Scriptures about these sins, and then we'll come back to these two verses again.

For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and debauchery in which they have indulged.

There is a list of sins in each verse. In v20: *discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder*. Paul lists the first four of these, in the same order, when he describes the works of the flesh in Galatians 5: *discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition*.

In v21, Paul lists three more: *impurity, sexual immorality, and debauchery*. In Gal 5, the works of the flesh begin with exactly those three, though not in that order. The works of the flesh are alive and well in the Corinthian church.

At the end of the works of the flesh, the same sins that some Corinthians are involved in, we read this line: *I warn you now, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God*. The works of the flesh were active in the Galatian churches, and now they are active in the Corinthian church. Paul twice warned the Galatian churches about this.

This is why Paul is so distressed about the Corinthians who are living like this. If they keep it up, they will not inherit the kingdom of God, they will not be saved, or be with the Lord forever.

In 1 Cor 6:9-10 Paul has a similar list of sins. The Corinthians have already been warned like this too. At the beginning of the 1 Cor list of sins, Paul writes: *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived*. Don't you know this? Don't be fooled. At the end of the 1Cor 6 list he says it again: *these people will not inherit the kingdom of God*.

This is why Paul worries about the Corinthians. In 1 Cor 6 he told them two times that the people who live like this will not be saved, will not inherit eternal life. He told them twice, and he added, *do not be deceived*. He says this to churches, and has trouble getting them to believe it.

This is why Paul says that he won't spare the Corinthians in his third visit. He loves them, how can he spare them? Their house is on fire, he has to tell them. This is why he says he will be bold. He does not like to be bold, and perhaps tear down not build up. He does not want that, but they are heading for disaster with God, and he loves them, so he will be bold.

[Omit small print paragraphs or sermon too long.] 2 Cor 5:19-6:2 Paul was talking about this back in 2 Cor 5, when he urged the Corinthians to be reconciled to God. 5:19 *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.* (Corinthians, says Paul, you are believers, but you have a big God problem. God wants to bring you back to himself, he will not count your sins against you.)

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you Corinthians on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (Paul says: God appeals to you Corinthians through us: turn away from your sins, and be reconciled to God. Christ also appeals to you through us to be reconciled to God.)

²¹ *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (Your sins, Corinthians, have already been paid for by Christ himself, so you could be forgiven and live obedient lives.)

6 As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. (God's grace to you Corinthians brought you to God, but he gives his grace to change how you live, and you're living they way you lived before Christ, you are blocking what his grace wants to do.)

² *For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.* (Corinthians, this is a good time to come back to God, he's still in a good mood, he's still got open arms to you, this won't last forever, right now he wants to receive you, urges you to come. Make use of this good time.)

This is reconciliation in 2 Corinthians. Paul is NOT giving the Corinthians the ministry of reconciliation, though sometimes it is taught that way. Paul's giving them the chance to be reconciled. We all stumble in many ways, but that's not what's happening in Corinth.

The Corinthians are persisting in sins that will keep them out of the kingdom, they are not struggling with this, they intend to continue, and so they are in trouble and need to be reconciled.

2 Cor 6:14 *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.* Paul is talking about the same thing here. *What fellowship can light have with darkness? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?* If we pick have who do the works of the flesh, we will become like them.

Strong Christians are NOT those who stay clean when they have unbelieving friends. Strong Christians are those who know the danger and generally avoid such people. In 1 Cor 15 Paul wrote, *Do not be deceived. Bad company corrupts good character.* Do not be deceived. Do we think we know more than the apostle Paul about this?

2 Cor 6:16 Paul's Old Testament appeal to the Corinthians to leave their sins behind: *As God has said, I will live with you Corinthians, and I will walk among you, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. So come out from the unbelievers, and be separate, and touch no unclean thing. I will receive you, and I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.*

Remember this is a call to believers walking away from the Lord: *God has said the same to us today, "I will live with you the people of KCC, and I will walk among you, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. So, come out from the unbelievers, and be separate, and touch no unclean thing. I receive you, and I am a Father to you, and you are my sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty.*

Paul has been urging these people to come back to the throughout 2 Cor 5-6, but that's in the long version. Back to the end of 2 Cor 12.

2 Cor 12:20-21 Paul's List of Fears. *For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.*

Paul will talk to them about their sins. He has said that he will be bold, and that he will not spare them. That is not the whole story. These two long verses are a list of things he fears. The first time through we looked at the list of their sins. Now we look at the list of his fears.

(1) Paul fears what he will find in Corinth. It will be a mess. (2) He fears that they won't like how Paul treats them. They will be upset with him, which he fears. (3) He fears all the sins he will see when he's there. (4) He fears that God will humble him, God let him be humiliated by the Corinthians, as before. (5) He fears his own grief when he sees that they won't repent.

You and I would be afraid if we were going into a situation like that, and so was Paul. He names all these fears for them, so they know. We do fear these things if we go talk to someone about their sin. In fact, usually we won't go at all, because we are afraid. Paul was afraid too, but he knew Christ loved them, and he loved them, so he went into this afraid and telling them his fears.

Two things to learn: One, the Lord through Paul gives us today a picture of what Christian love look like when we love a believer who's wandering away from the Lord. There are many things this picture leaves unanswered, but it is an excellent place to start.

Two, the Lord also gives us a picture of how he loves us when we wander away from him. Christ does for us all that Paul did for them, and more. Not less, but more. This is the shepherd who makes sure the 99 are safe, then goes to find the lost sheep that's tangled in the bushes and cannot get loose. Amen.

God Almighty, may our love grow and increase, so that our love for our brothers and sisters will be more like the love you showed us in this Scripture. And, God Almighty, this is a small reflection of how you love us when we wander badly, and we are grateful to you. Your love is the best thing that could happen to any human, and you show your love for us in this way. We praise and thank you. Amen.