

A Prayer for Wandering Christians

2 Corinthians 13:7-9

Turn to 2 Corinthians 13. This is the last teaching on 2 Corinthians, and chap. 13 provides a pretty good summary of the whole letter. In 13:7-9 Paul tells them how he prays for them, and Christ shows us how to pray for wandering Christians.

We will go through that prayer with more care, but first let's summarize. At the center of this letter is the question: what does a genuine servant of Christ look like? How can you tell a real servant of Christ from a false one?

This was a hot issue, because the Corinthians thought real servant of Christ would of course be strong and successful, and Paul was often weak and his life was full of troubles. They knew his life was like this, and he agreed.

So the Corinthian church thought he could not be a real servant of Christ, or at least not a good one. But there they were wrong. In God's most powerful and successful work through Christ, speaking here of Christ's crucifixion and death, Christ was weak, powerless, and humiliated. In that way, Jesus won the greatest spiritual victory that earth has ever seen.

Jesus submitted to weakness and humiliation and death, and by that he turned humanity and all creation back toward God. The human version of strength and success is absolutely meaningless in the kingdom of God. I hope you have caught that from 2 Corinthians.

If I have human strength and success, and God uses me for his kingdom, he's using me *in spite of* my strength and success, not *because of* it. He will use anyone, even the successful strong.

The apostle Paul himself was *always* hard pressed and perplexed, chased and struck down. He was regularly hungry and thirsty, cold and wearing rags. Will I then believe that God uses me because I am strong and successful? After the example of Christ and of Paul? God forbid. Never.

1 Cor 1:27 God chose the foolish to shame the wise, God chose the weak to shame the strong.
2Cor 4:7 We have this treasure in clay jars, so the greatness of power is from God not from us.
Natural strength and success are at best meaningless in the service of Christ.

A true servant of Christ, as God shows us in 2 Corinthians, is regularly weak and not respected, and lives out the fruit of the Spirit. In our relationships, the Spirit makes us loving, joyful, and peaceful. In our relationships the Spirit leads us to be patient, and kind, and good. Because of the Spirit we are faithful to each other, and gentle.

And self-control: when we are hurt and furious and want to clobber someone, or attack in some way, the Spirit leads us to control that, not to act it out, instead show ourselves as peaceful and patient. That was the grace of God on Paul, who shows us the ultimate marks of Christ's servants: a life of troubles and the fruit of the Spirit. Human strength and success not relevant.

We need God's kindly education on this as much as the Corinthians did. I need it. In this Scripture God has been showing us what a true servant of Jesus looks like.

Also, the Corinthians were not living in Christ's ways. There is a list of sins at the end of 2 Cor 12 that's very close to the works of the flesh that Paul lists in Galatians 5.

The flesh, our human weakness toward sin, wants us to live one way, and the Spirit wants us to live the other way, the fruit of the Spirit, which I just listed. In the Corinthian church, the works of the flesh were alive and well. Paul was distressed about this sin in their lives, God was distressed, not angry but worried.

God and Christ themselves were urging these sinning believers, and pleading with them, to turn away from this spiritual pollution and follow the Lord again. Paul had written to them before about these things, and spoken to them directly, but it had not helped.

Good, now we are ready to read 2 Corinthians 13.

This Time I will not Spare You 13:1-2

This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." ²I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others.

Paul quotes Moses in Deuteronomy, who said we should not believe just one person accusing someone else. There need to be two or three witnesses before we believe the accusation.

It seems that Paul is counting how many times he himself spoke to the Corinthians about their sin. There need to be two or three witnesses, says Moses. Paul warned them while he was with them the second time, and the third visit is coming up. 3 visits = 3 witnesses.

"I will not spare those who sinned." He listed their sins at the end of chap. 12: divisions in the church, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, sexual immorality. He's going to speak about these. This is not different than love, the first fruit of the Spirit. In Canadian society, love means we tolerate everything, accept everything, and the greatest sin is not to accept everything.

But in God's alternative society, which we are, the Corinthian sins are a real problem, and love means Paul needs to speak kindly but directly about their, just as in this letter.

Proof that Christ speaks through Paul 13:3-6

I am going to paraphrase this. Paul defends himself again: yes, he has weaknesses, but Christ does not speak through Paul any less for that. God is teaching us, and this is important, because we often experience weakness. When we do, we assume that as long as we are weak, we're not getting anything done for the Lord. That is so wrong. Paul *always* felt weak.

My paraphrase of vv3-6: “You Corinthians want proof that Christ speaks through me, Paul. You think he does not, because I am weak. But Christ also was weak, and died as a weak man, he died in suffering and shame. But he was raised by God’s power, and is Lord of heaven and earth. And while I, Paul, am weak and shamed by you, the powerful Christ is entirely able to speak through me.”

“Don’t take my word for it, Corinthians. Examine yourselves, test yourselves. Don’t you realize that Christ lives among you? (A remarkable thing to say to a church full of the works of the flesh.) Christ came to you because I preached Christ and you believed. So how can you doubt that Christ speaks through me? Your faith and Christ among you proves that Christ speaks to you through me.”

The Prayer for Wandering Christians 12:7-9 *Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.* ⁸ *For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.* ⁹ *We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored.*

Pray. Something real simple: he prayed for them, says this in v7 and v9. When believers in my circle of people wander from Christ, I fret and worry, or get angry. I stew over if I should speak to them, and what to say, and when. Lots of energy on that. I’m easily too busy with those things to pray to God for them. Those other things don’t help much. *Pray to God for them!*

For what? The actual prayer could hardly be simpler. V7, *that you will not do thing wrong. So that you will do what is right.* V9, *our prayer is that you may be fully restored.* What Paul asks for is almost childlike. “God, get them moving in the right direction, lead them away from the wrong and toward the right, bring them back.”

Love for Sinning Christians. *Not so that people will think we have stood the test, but that you will do what is right even though people think we have failed. ... We have joy whenever we have weaknesses but you are strong in the Lord.*

Paul has been defending his clean motives in almost every chapter of 2 Corinthians. He was being accused of doing everything for selfish motives, and the false apostles in Corinth were indeed living from selfish motives, so he never stops telling them why he does what he does.

In the process, the Lord gives us such an example of someone who wants others to do well. Here it is again, from vv7,9: *Not so that people will think we have stood the test, but that you will do what is right even though people think we have failed. ... We have joy whenever we have weaknesses but you are strong in the Lord.*

We DON'T pray that sinning believers will be restored so that we can show ourselves good servants of Christ, or so that we can look spiritually competent. We would rather look like spiritual failures ourselves, if only those people would begin to live right.

We will not be spiritual failures, but it is okay if others think we are, if only the ones we pray for would turn to God. If we look spiritually weak, but you the wandering believer would be strong in the Lord, we would have joy. That's how Paul describes himself as he prays.

Let me make clear, my brothers and sisters, that I do not love people like that. I pray for you people, and I do it genuinely before the Lord, but I would not easily say that I have joy whenever I have weaknesses but the people I pray for are strong in the Lord.

But sometimes praying for other people is hard work, isn't it. I'm sure many of you have experienced that too. Some times we know that people we love need prayer, and we know the Lord calls us to pray for them, but it somehow is going upstream or like climbing a steep hill.

Sometimes the problem is me, but often not. The problem is not always my own flesh and blood, but the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil. According to Ephesians 6, we all are regularly struggling and wrestling with these spiritual enemies of God.

And in Eph 6, right after describing that spiritual battle, Paul urges prayer, 4x in one verse: ***Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests, Be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.***

So don't be surprised that the spiritual forces of evil do not want us to pray. I think we beat ourselves up for prayerlessness when the problem comes from our invisible enemies.

Pray for wandering believers. Pray that they would do no wrong, that they would do right, that they would be restored to the Lord, that they would be strong in the Lord. We pray this because we love the Lord and we love them.

One more time: why write this letter? 13:10 *This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.*

Paul so dreaded going to Corinth and having to confront them about their sin. He did not want to be harsh, did not want to be sharp. He wished he could spare them. Because he loves Christ and loves them, he will do it, because unrepentant sinning is taking them to spiritual disaster.

It was easier for Paul to say it first in writing. This could work for you and me also. He wrote them what the problem was, he wrote them he would speak bluntly to them about it, and that they needed to turn from their sins.

Saying it in a letter was less painful than doing it face to face, so he said it first in a letter. Then he would come to them. If they did the right thing because of this letter, then he could spare them, which would be a great relief to him. And them also.

We can see that once in a while believers need to speak directly to one another about serious sins that the sinning believer does not intend to stop. This is unpleasant for everyone. It does not necessarily need to happen immediately, but it can't be put off indefinitely, either. And explaining the matter carefully ahead of time in writing can be a good idea.

The one who speaks to the other needs to guard and steer their own motives. This cannot come out of frustration. We will feel frustrated, and probably angry, at the believers who are disobeying the Lord in this way. OK. But we need to work on that before we take action.

We need to find the higher road, that is, we are first of all servants of Christ, and he loves that sinner, and he loves the church that the sinner is disturbing, and Christ is pleading with that sinner and urging them to turn away from the unclean thing and come back to him.

We are **his** messenger. **He** wants to bring back a lost sheep who is caught in the bushes, and we are **his** servant. We will speak plainly, and say it like it is, but the goal is not justice, not giving anyone what they deserve. **Christ** hopes that the sinner would not do any more wrong, that they would do what is right, they would be restored to him and strong in him. We are **his** messengers.

And we will pray to God for these things.

2 Cor 13:14 - May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.