

**Christ provided the tell-tale mark of true Christ-likeness: strength in weakness while reaching out to souls for Christ in order to build them up.**

### **1. The signs of a true apostle. (v.11-12)**

In verse 11, Paul again denied being inferior to the super-apostles. Both the super-apostles and the Corinthians were pressuring Paul to present his credentials, and the situation had driven Paul to write about himself. It was illuminating that Paul wrote here in verse 11 that that he “*ought to have been commended by*” the Corinthians. Instead, the Corinthians were joining with the false apostles in requiring Paul’s explanation of his qualifications.

So, in verse 12, Paul made his last reference to his own qualifications. He gave what he called “*the signs of a true apostle.*” And wrote that those signs were performed among the Corinthians. Before we get to miracles, notice what Paul wrote next – that there was a moral quality associated with the work of the true apostle in the middle of verse 12, “*...with utmost patience.*” That is, with perseverance. In other words, with endurance during difficulties. There were difficulties that needed to be overcome, and for Paul the solution was to endure and to be patient. Even though Paul was able to do miracles, the solution for the difficulties was not for God to miraculously remove the afflictions! Instead, the solution was to endure. A true apostle would show patience. A true apostle would experience weakness of his own, and also experience the strength of Christ. The true apostle would keep on enduring, and only experience triumph later. The genuine apostle had a ministry shaped by the cross first, and only later the resurrection.

The authenticity of an apostle was seen in his stamina, in his fortitude.

It is only people in the world who think that if God is blessing, then it is always success, always easy, always a show of personal strength like the hero in a movie.

Paul just wrote in verse 11 that he was nothing. Paul now wrote in verse 12 that Paul was required by Christ to show utmost patience in his ministry with the Corinthians, even though Paul had access to supernatural powers!

Now we can talk about the supernatural signs of an apostle. There are 3 interesting words in verse 12 that all refer to the same thing - miracles. The three words are 1) signs and 2) wonders and 3) mighty works. All 3 words refer to miracles from 3 different vantage points. First, we look at the word “sign,” which is used twice in verse 12. A sign is understood by that to which it points. A sign was a miracle that pointed to something beyond itself, it was a miracle considered from the standpoint of its meaning or significance. One example was from the Book of Acts, chapter 3, the apostles John and Peter healed a man crippled since his birth, and that miracle pointed to each of us – we are each a sinner crippled by sin since birth, then

healed by the apostle of Christ, showing that Jesus is God. The miracle is a sign that points us to Christ. Secondly, the word “wonders.” Wonders were miracles viewed from the perspective of the impression that the event made on the observers – for example, crowds were awestruck by the miracles, so they are called wonders. Thirdly, the phrase “*mighty works*” simply means powers, or miracles that emphasize God’s power through the event, in a special way.

A sign points to Christ, a wonder astonishes the crowd, and a mighty works shows the power of God. All three signs were present in the ministry of a true apostle.

Paul was suggesting that the ministry of apostles was validated by God through miracles, and that the miracles pointed beyond themselves to the gospel message. The miracles were tangible and visible evidence that God was at work in connection with the spread of the gospel through the missionary work of Paul in the city of Corinth.

We read the same thought in Hebrews 2:3-4, “...*such a great salvation...was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to His will.*”

Miracles were only the validation of Apostles, and the apostles were sent to declare the good news of spiritual salvation to spiritually dead people.

## **2. The sacrifices of a true apostle. (v.13-18)**

In verses 13-18, Paul showed his willingness to make sacrifices for the Corinthians, and the sacrifices prove his fatherly love for them. Sacrifices were doing things that were demanding, such as doing missionary work that included traveling and being in harm’s way in order to start new churches in various places, such as Ephesus, Corinth and Philippi. The effort and sacrifices required from Paul a commitment to the yet unsaved people in various cities. Paul not only made the effort and paid the personal cost to visit the places initially to start the churches in the first place, but then Paul also continued to show apostolic and Olympian effort to follow up those places in 3 ways 1) Paul conducted follow-up visits, 2) Paul sent other missionaries to follow up by visiting them 3) Paul wrote letters to each of them. (Ephesians, Philippians, 2 letters to the Corinthians.) In the case of the Corinthians, Paul used all 3 methods. Visits, sending others, and letters.

So, in verse 13 Paul addressed yet another criticism that had been made of Paul over in the city of Corinth. Probably, the issue in verse 13 was based on what Paul already covered back in chapters 1 and 2, Paul had not arrived when Paul said that he would arrive. So, people in Corinth were expanding that non-arrival to now also declaring that Paul was prioritizing other churches ahead of the church of Corinth by Paul staying in other cities to serve other churches, instead of Paul traveling to Corinth, as Paul had promised to do. Yet here in verse 13, Paul

showed that Corinth was not less favored, not a lower priority. In fact, Paul reminded them here in verse 13 that Paul had worked for them at Corinth without accepting any financial support from them, which was itself an evidence of Paul's genuine concern for them. With the irony we have seen in this letter, now Paul asks their forgiveness for not accepting money. Verse 13, "*For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!*" It was a mild rebuke of the Corinthians. If their concern was not visiting, he had visited, and if their concern was Paul not accepting a salary, then Paul would reverse that and accept a salary. Either way, the sacrifices of Paul were clear, and that was proof positive that Paul was truly an apostle.

It was now 6 years since missionary Paul had initially arrived at sin city Corinth. Months he had stayed, and then left to minister elsewhere. Since Paul left, Paul had already visited Corinth a second time. So, here in verse 14, Paul was writing that Paul was fully ready and geared up to visit the Corinthians for the third time. In fact, one of the purposes of this letter of 2 Corinthians was to prepare THEM for their third visit from Paul. Here in verse 14, just to be clear about the money, Paul re-committed to not being a financial burden to them. He was confirming what he already wrote back in chapter 11, verse 9. Paul's approach was not to receive, but rather to give. Paul was not a taker, but rather Paul was a giver. Listen for Paul's expression of it as we read from verse 14 into verse 15, "*...And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours, but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls...*"

Paul did not want a missionary salary or apostle salary from the Corinthians, but rather Paul wanted the hearts of the Corinthians themselves – he wanted their child-like love for Paul as their spiritual father! Paul wanted their spiritual well-being. Paul had an eagerness to fellowship with them on this upcoming third visit! Paul viewed his relationship to the Corinthians as a family-type of relationship. Paul was the parent, the father, the giver in the relationship, and the Corinthians were the children, the new converts, or the receivers in the relationship.

Like a parent, Paul's commitment to self-giving went way beyond the financial. He wrote in verse 15, "*I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls...*" Paul would willingly and even gladly spend everything he had for the Corinthians. Paul would spend all of his material resources and all of his energies. The personal cost that Paul had already paid was enormous: imprisonments, beatings, often close brushes with death, beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, adrift at sea, dangers from rivers, robbers, wilderness, and false brothers.

Paul's selfless sacrifice was exactly what Christ Himself did, as Paul already wrote back in chapter 8, verse 9, "*...though Jesus was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, by His poverty might become rich.*" Of course Paul's

sacrifices did not save the Corinthians, but Paul's sacrifices were in continuity with the sacrifice of Christ. The sacrifices of an apostle reflect Christ-likeness.

True ministry is Christ-like: tireless, selfless, always seeking the spiritual welfare of others, gladly spending and gladly being spent.

Ministry is similar to parenting. True parenting is tireless, selfless, always seeking the good of the child, gladly spending and gladly being spent.

Parents don't expect much from their children by way of presents or gifts from their young children. However, the parents do anticipate that the love given from the parents to the child will result in love in return from the children back to the parents. This explains the last sentence of verse 15, "*If I love you more, am I to be loved less?*"

Paul found it difficult to understand why his own self-giving expressions of Christ-like love and father-like love had not been reciprocated by the Corinthians. So, as came to visit them for a 3<sup>rd</sup> time, and during that 3<sup>rd</sup> visit as Paul would give himself to them in still more love, the question was would they love Paul more?

Next, verse 16 put it beyond doubt that Paul was slandered by the Corinthians. "*...I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.*" They charged Paul with crafty underhanded actions, in order to gain money from them. Paul did not share specifics here, but it is likely that they thought Paul had sent Titus in order to collect the money from Corinth intended for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, only so that Paul could be involved in financial chicanery or trickery.

Paul answered the slander in verses 17 and 18, "*Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?*"

The visits made by Titus, by the other brother, and by Paul himself had surfaced no reason for such concerns for craftiness or theft at all. Everything had been completely above board and without any financial strings attached whatsoever. Paul recognized that it was sometimes difficult for the Corinthians to keep their thinking correct about what actually happened, after they had heard an alternative version from other people. So, in a kind and fatherly way, Paul was asking them to use their own memories, and to re-trace the course of events. They each knew that there was no money that had changed hands, so no one took advantage of anyone. Paul was confident that his financial integrity would be completely vindicated if only the Corinthians would think things through carefully.

### **3. The concerns of a true apostle. (v.19-21)**

The question that opened verse 19 showed that after 3 chapters, Paul remained concerned that the Corinthians might misunderstand why Paul has written this way.

So in verse 19 Paul wrote, “*Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, Beloved.*”

If you were to sit down with a parent who raised a child from birth to age 18, and said, why did you do it? They would say, it was all for the child’s upbuilding.

Here it is as if someone asked – Paul, being an apostle is so hard – why did you do it? Paul answered It was all for their upbuilding!

Here Paul wrote “we” because Timothy was with Paul there. The motive of Paul and Timothy was not clearing their own names, but rather the upbuilding of the Corinthians. It was all for your upbuilding! All of it! The shipwrecks and beatings. The 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> letters. All the boasting. All the visits. All the sending of Titus and others. All of it was for one goal – not that Paul’s reputation would be repaired. No. Rather, the one goal was that the Corinthians would be built up in their faith in Christ. Paul was a true apostle of Christ, and therefore if a boasting review of Paul’s character and Paul’s message was needed to point them to Christ, then Paul would do it. Paul was thoroughly and fully motivated by concern for the spiritual well-being of the Corinthians. Why would Paul work to re-assert and re-establish his own authenticity of his own ministry among them? Because their doubts about Paul were detrimental to them, since Paul was God’s messenger to them.

Self-vindication is not appropriate for Christians. However, taking measures to secure continuance in ministry is appropriate for Christians. Paul needed to vindicate his ministry and his own character in order to continue in ministry with the Corinthians. Here in verse 19, Paul wrote to them with the word “beloved” or could be translated, “dear friends.” It was another spontaneous expression of Paul’s affection for them. In other places, Paul called them brothers. He would do anything for them. He nearly died for them multiple times.

Paul did all of this in the sight of God, as he wrote here in verse 19. Paul was aware that God saw straight into Paul’s heart, and that God was able to discern Paul’s motives. Hebrews 4:13, “*...no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to Whom we must give account.*”

In the last two verses, we must keep in mind Paul’s love for them, calling them beloved and bothers, and dear friends, and the fact that Paul was a spiritual father to them. There are times when encounters between parents and children are not very pleasant for either the parent or the child. For example, sometimes a parent needs to show love by acting strongly in correcting the child.

Listen to verse 20a, “*...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—*”

Strong words appropriately spoken from a parent to a child can be an expression of love. We all want pleasant experiences, but sometimes the strong words are needed and are more important than pleasant interchange.

What picture do we have of the churches in the New Testament, such as the church in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Philippi or in Thessalonica? The members of these churches were new Christians, and quite immature. Listen for a description of Paul's concern for what he might find on his third visit to the Corinthians in verse 20b, "*...perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.*" This was a similar concern of Paul's over in the church in Ephesus, as we read in Ephesians 4:31-32, "*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*"

It is not just Paul the apostle. All the true apostles shared these concerns – as we also we read in Hebrews 5:12, "*...though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food...*"

Here in our passage in chapter 12:20, we notice that the faults in Paul's list are almost all in the realm of attitudes. Now that we are nearing the end of the letter of 2 Corinthians, how interesting to notice that Paul was ending the second letter with the very same concern Paul wrote at the beginning of the first letter to the Corinthians! In 1 Corinthians chapters 1-4, Paul was concerned for their unity as a church. A general immaturity was leading to childishness within their relationships. They were attaching themselves to Apollos, or to Peter or even to Paul, instead of being united to Christ alone, which unifies every brother and sister with every brother and sister. Paul as their spiritual father asked that the spiritual family have no divisions. Paul urged them to be united in the same mind. Paul reminded them that what unifies was the cross of Christ.

Now in our last verse today, verse 21, Paul expressed concern at a different level. Not just unity and avoiding divisions. Paul was concerned that some people would leave Christ, leave the church, leave Christianity, and go back to the ways of the world. Listen to verse 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, sensual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.*"

Paul's deepest concern was those who sinned and did not repent. Paul would be sad and mourn over every single one of them, just as Christ the Good shepherd is

concerned for each and every sheep.

**Conclusion:**

To be a true apostle ministering to people meant to always accept new happiness and new distress. The missionary who gives himself to serve people can never be a completely sad person, nor can he be a completely glad person. To that missionary will come deeper and deeper joy mixed in the same cup with a sorrow that it was beyond his power to experience before.

Paul was a happy to work night and day to be there for the spiritual birth of the Corinthians. But once they were converted and a church was formed, Paul lived with a constant concern that someone might fall away from Christ. Paul hitched his whole life to the Corinthians, and rode with them through the highs and the lows.

Every Christian missionary is the same today. Every Christian is the same today. We love the church, serve the church, we are glad to spend and be spent for the church. We seek the spiritual good of souls. There will be incredible joys in the church. There will be an index of concerns for the church, with many potential pitfalls surrounding the church.

Paul was a loving pastor-father to them. Paul lived with both gladness and sadness.

The proof of Paul's genuineness was there for all to see.

These things are seen where God's servants boast in their weaknesses.

*When we are weak, then we are strong.*

*May the power of Christ rest upon us.*