

Pray for your time together in God's Word!

Leaders Note: In this passage Paul shows his concern for the Corinthian church. He does this in the tone of his appeal, through forceful words and structure, through analogy, and through logical argument. In this lesson we will explore his concern for the Corinthian church and how that concern manifested itself in Paul's life.

Read the passage out loud as a group. Option: Give the group 5 minutes to look at the passage by themselves.

This Week's Passage

Scripture Reference

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

Paul's Concern for the Corinthians

11 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. 12 I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. 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?

19 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, dear friends, is for your strengthening. 20 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.

Discussion

Ask the Group: What about this passage stood out to you?

Leaders' Note: This question gives your group the opportunity to explore their own ideas before leading them down a specific discussion. Caution: Do not let this turn into a debate about personal understandings—keep it more on the "observation" level.

Ask the Group: In verse 11 Paul states that he was a fool, but that the Corinthians drove him to it. Paul is using sarcasm here to contrast his actions with those of the ‘super apostles.’ Look back at 2 Corinthians 11:22-33. How did Paul show that he was ‘a fool’ in that passage?

Possible Answers: Giving up his lineage and privileged position (v. 22), having endured hardship so that others could know Christ (vv. 23-27), concern for the churches (v. 28), willingness to boast in weakness (v. 30).

- **Ask the Group:** What do verses 11-19 of 2 Corinthians 12 tell us about how Paul was foolish and how the Corinthians made him foolish?

Possible Answers: He should have been commended by them but was not (v. 11); he sustained himself by his own work and did not rely on their funds but they took offence by this (v. 13); he gave of himself for them only to have them take allegiance with the ‘super apostles’ (v. 15).

Ask the Group: In verse 11 Paul both states that he is “not in the least inferior to the ‘super apostles’ and that he is nothing. How are both of these statements true? You may want to look back at 12:7-10 to help answer this question.

Possible Answers: He is not inferior to the ‘super apostles’ because of the marks of true apostleship (v.12), because of his perseverance (v. 12). He is nothing because it is the power of God that is working through him and not Paul himself. He had a thorn in the flesh (v. 7); he was forced to rely on God (vv. 9-10).

Leader’s Note: There has long been historical conjecture over what Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ really was. It is not our purpose here to solve this mystery. There are many good resources that those who wish to delve into this can take up on their own.

The marks of a true apostle mentioned in v. 12 show that Paul did great things through God’s power. The text is not clear as to what those signs, wonders and miracles were. The text does show that they were proof of Paul’s apostleship. It would be best to avoid speculation on the exact nature of them or to delve into conjecture about their validity in the modern church based on this passage.

Ask the Group: What things in your life do you consider “burdensome”?

Possible Answers: Working, relationships, studies, etc.

- **Ask the Group:** In verses 13 and 14 Paul tells the Corinthians that the only way he made them inferior was to not burden them (that is, he did not allow them to support him monetarily). How does this view of burdening differ from how we look at a burden today?

Leaders Note: One possible answer is that because he did not give them the opportunity to support him financially, they did not get the opportunity to grow closer to God by supporting him.

Ask the Group: In verse 14 Paul uses parents and children as an analogy for his relationship with the Corinthians. How does this analogy help us understand his treatment of the Corinthians?

Possible Answers: Paul gave of himself as a parent might give of his or herself for the betterment of the child. Parents give joyfully for their children as Paul did (v. 14-15).

Parents forego their own comforts for their children as did Paul (11:24-27); parents have concern for their children as did Paul (11:28).

- **Ask the Group:** How do you show care for others when you're concerned about them?

Possible Answers: Following up with them (phone calls, email, etc.), praying for/with them, etc.

Ask the Group: Verse 19 serves as a preliminary conclusion not only for this passage but for the entire letter. How do the texts we have looked at today support this idea?

Possible Answers: Paul has been showing his concern for the Corinthian church by demonstrating that concern in his actions, by not letting them be pulled aside by the 'super apostles', by affirming a godly view of worldly goods, by exhorting them to be forgiven of their sin, and by not allowing their behavior to drive him away.

Ask the Group: Reread vv. 20-21. How do our relationships today reflect unrealized expectations in a similar way to what Paul and the Corinthians were experiencing?

Possible Answers: Our spiritual leaders may not look as charismatic, be as well spoken or be as personable as we might want them to be. Our fellow believers may struggle with sins that may make them hard to live around. We may not make the progress in our spiritual growth that our leaders and mentors would like us to make.

Gospel Application

Ask the Group (small or large): How can we allow the Gospel to so permeate our lives that we have the same type of concern for others that Paul had?

Ask the Group (small or large): In what ways may God be calling of us to give of ourselves in hard circumstances?

- **Ask the Group (small or large):** How can we allow the Gospel to empower us to do this?

Suggestion: Send this application question and challenge out during the week to encourage your group.

Last Week's Application: (Discuss if time)

Ask the Group (small or large): Is there an area in your life where your boasting has made you conceited?

- **Ask the Group (small or large):** How can you seek out humility in light of this?

Ask the Group (small or large): How can you delight in your weaknesses this week?