

Committed to Christ

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on January 6, 2019

This morning we begin a seven part sermon series on 2 Corinthians. Before we read today's text, let us go over some of the background information.

2 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul somewhere around 56 A.D., while he was in Macedonia, during his third missionary journey, approximately ten years before he was martyred. The letter he wrote was addressed to the church in the Greek cosmopolitan seaport city of Corinth, as well as to believers everywhere. Paul had planted the church in Corinth about five years earlier and had nurtured it for a period of eighteen months during his second missionary journey.

Being the founder of the church in Corinth, Paul was held in high esteem. However, in his absence, his authority and his teachings were being challenged by others in the congregation who had a different agenda. As a result, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to affirm the gospel that he had preached, and to put the church on notice that he was coming to visit them in person, bearing the authority and power of an apostle, for the purpose of putting God's house in order.

Quickly summarizing the entire letter, 2 Corinthians can be divided into four sections. In the first section, Paul gives an update on what has transpired in his life since their last communication. In the second section, Paul explains his actions in ministry. In the third section, Paul justifies the collection he initiated for the church in Jerusalem. In the fourth section, Paul authenticates his apostleship. Again, all this was written as part of a warning to the Corinthians that Paul was coming very soon in the authority and power of Christ to confront the false teachers who were leading the church astray.

And now, turning to today's reading, let us hear the Word of God as found in 2 Corinthians, chapter one, verses three through eleven.

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, 4 who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. 6 If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. 8 We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the

sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, 11 as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

In the gospels, Jesus tells a parable about the wheat and the tares. In the parable a man plants good seed in his field. But while he slept, his enemy planted weeds. Thus, the field that was intended to produce a harvest of wheat was filled with both wheat and weeds.

In his interpretation of the parable, Jesus tells his disciples that he is the man who planted the good seed and the Devil is the one who planted the weeds in the hopes of destroying God's good work. This parable describes a pattern that can be observed throughout the Bible.

Starting in the book of Genesis, we can see this pattern emerging as God creates Adam and Eve, and He tells them their identity, their calling, and the rules that govern their lives. However, immediately after, the Devil comes to Adam and Eve and whispers in their ear, "did God really say?" Notice how in this story, God plants the wheat and the Devil comes right after and plants the weeds.

In the gospels, and in the book of Acts, which provides the history of the early church, the observant reader will note that every time the gospel is preached in a new place there is a demonic attack. Wherever God plants wheat, the Devil follows right behind and sows tares.

This is why almost every book in the Bible has some kind of warning against false teachers, false prophets, or false witnesses. Because wherever God sows wheat, the Devil sows tares. This pattern can be observed throughout the Bible. It is also present in 2 Corinthians. For after the good seed of the gospel had been sown by Paul and other servants of Christ, right on their heels, false teachers came and planted false doctrines that were leading the church into darkness.

This is the big problem that Paul addresses in his second letter to the Corinthians. In chapter eleven, at the conclusion of his epistle, Paul expressed his concern for the church that they were being deceived just like Eve was in the garden. Thus, in chapter thirteen, Paul gives the church notice that he will be visiting them shortly and he will hold the church accountable for their teaching and for their lifestyle. The purpose of the warning was to give the church an opportunity to correct their thinking and their behaviour before Paul was forced to discipline them.

This is important to keep in mind, because it provides the context for understanding the entire letter of 2 Corinthians. Thus, in today's reading, Paul isn't describing the suffering he has experienced during his missionary journeys because he is feeling down and needs a sympathetic ear. Nor is he writing a motivational speech to inspire those going through hard

times. No, the reason Paul writes about his trials is because he is preparing to confront the Corinthian church on issues of doctrine and lifestyle, and he is laying the necessary ground work for a difficult and unpleasant task.

In laying the groundwork, what Paul is seeking to do in the opening chapter of his letter is establish a sound rationale for the uncomfortable conversation that is about to take place, and he wants to leave no doubt in the minds of the Corinthian congregation, and especially the false teachers, that he possesses the authority and the power to carry out everything he intends to do. At the same time, Paul wants to communicate his tough love message in a pastoral manner. As a result, in 2 Corinthians Paul takes great care to be as gentle as possible, while being as clear as possible.

This is why he begins his letter the way that he does. Notice how in today's reading Paul begins by gently reminding the Corinthians of God's love for them and of his love for them. In today's reading, also notice that Paul ignores all the thorny issues of doctrine and lifestyle that he will address later in his letter.

At the same time, as Paul lowers his readers' defenses by gently reminding them of God's love for them, and of his love for them, he subtly establishes his rationale for the difficult conversation that he intends to initiate with the church. This rationale is communicated in narrative form, as Paul describes the suffering he has endured on account of his preaching the gospel.

While he doesn't say it explicitly, by describing the great hardships he has endured as an apostle of Christ, Paul is telling the Corinthians, that truth exists, he is telling the church that truth is knowable and he is telling the church that truth matters.

And why does truth matter? In today's Scripture reading Paul tells us why truth matters in narrative form. Using the story of his personal afflictions, Paul reiterates the message of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares. Notice the connection. In today's reading Paul describes how he, and other servants of the Living God sowed the seeds of the gospel as God directed them. And immediately, on their heels, the Devil came right behind sowing seeds of destruction. And chaos and great suffering was the result.

This is why contending for the truth is so important. Because the Devil's words bring death and destruction. This was the case in the garden when Adam and Eve were deceived. This was the case with the false prophets of the Old Testament who constantly misled God's people. This was the case of the false teachers who arose everywhere the gospel was preached in the New Testament. It was a serious matter.

And this was why Paul was coming to Corinth in the authority and power given to him by Christ. This is why he had every intention of using that authority and power to exercise church

discipline. Because truth matters. The gospel matters. And the Devil's lies need to be dealt with firmly and without compromise.

This is the first message Paul wanted to communicate to the Corinthians in a pastoral manner as he laid the groundwork for the difficult task that was before him. The second message that he wanted to communicate clearly, without actually saying it directly, was that he possessed the authority and the power to discipline the church and that he had every intention of doing so. In other words, Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that he was not the spiritual father who counts to three and then does nothing. He meant business, and he wanted to be sure they knew it. However, the message needed to be expressed in a pastoral manner.

In order to accomplish this objective Paul describes his suffering in detail, right at the beginning of his letter and at the very end of his letter as a way of proving his commitment to Christ and confirming his call as an apostle.

And why does he use this method? Because nothing establishes the character of a man better than the way that he faces adversity. Nothing establishes the motives of a man more clearly than the personal loss he endures for the cause in which he believes. In other words, in suffering the true substance of a human being is revealed.

This is why Paul speaks at length of his suffering at the beginning of his letter to the Corinthians and at the end. Because it provides a powerful witness to his character and his motives that is easy to verify, accessible to all, and impossible to dismiss.

And by doing so, Paul laid the groundwork for the difficult conversation he needed to have with the Corinthian church, in a pastoral manner. Without them being even aware of what he was doing, Paul reminded the church of his zeal for the truth and why the truth matters. He also reminded the church of the authority and the power that he possessed and that he was fully prepared to exercise this authority in setting the church straight. And all this was accomplished by telling the story of his sufferings on account of the preaching the gospel.

This is the message that Paul communicated to the church two thousand years ago as he described the nature of his suffering on account of preaching the gospel of Christ. And this is the message that Paul communicates to us as we reflect on his words today. So, as we ponder these God inspired words, at the beginning of a new year, may we be renewed in our conviction to pursue the truth without compromise, may we be renewed in our conviction to follow Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And in doing so, may we know the comfort of God, as we grow in patience, endurance and hope.