

First Sunday in Lent; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10

An Entreaty to Live as Christians

2Cor 6:1-10

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.) Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.

1. This lesson is an admonition to the Corinthians calculated to stimulate them in the performance of the duties they already recognize. The words are easily enough said, but execution is difficult and practice rare. For Paul gives a strange description of the Christian life, and the color and characteristics with which he exhibits it render it decidedly *unprepossessing*. First he says: "And working together with him we entreat also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain."

2. He calls the Corinthians co-workers, as in First Corinthians 3, 9, where he puts it: "We are God's fellow-workers; ye are God's husbandry, God's building." That is, we labor upon you with the external Word – teaching and admonishing; but God, working inwardly through the Spirit, gives the blessing and the success. He permits not our labor with the outward Word to be in vain. Therefore, God is the true Master, performing inwardly the

supreme work, while we aid outwardly, serving him through the ministry. The apostle's purpose in praising his co-laborers is to prevent them from despising the external Word as something inessential to them, or well enough known. For though God is able to effect everything without the instrumentality of the outward Word, working inwardly by his Spirit, this is by no means his purpose. He uses preachers as fellow-workers, or co-laborers, to accomplish his purpose through the Word when and where he pleases. Now, since preachers have the office, name and honor of fellow-workers with God, no one may be considered learned enough or holy enough to ignore or despise the most inferior preaching; especially since he knows not when the hour may come wherein God will, through preachers, perform his work in him.

3. Secondly, Paul shows the danger of neglecting the grace of God. He boldly declares here that the preaching of the Gospel is not an eternal, continuous and permanent mode of instruction, but rather a passing shower, which hastens on. What it strikes, it strikes; what it misses, it misses. It does not return, nor does it stand still. The sun and heat follow and dry it up. Experience shows that in no part of the world has the Gospel remained pure beyond the length of man's memory. Only so long as its pioneers lived did it stand and prosper. When they were gone, the light disappeared; factious spirits and false teachers followed immediately. Thus Moses announces (Deut 31, 29) that the children of Israel will corrupt themselves after his death; and the book of Judges testifies that so it really came to pass. Each time a judge died in whose days the Word of God obtained sway, the people fell away and became more wicked than before. King Joash did what was right so long as the high priest Jehoiada lived, but after the latter's death this had an end. And following the time of Christ and his apostles, the world was filled with seditious spirits and false teachers. Paul, in fact, declares (Acts 20, 29): "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock." So also we now have the pure Gospel. This is a time of grace and salvation and the acceptable day; but should the world continue, this condition, too, will soon pass.

4. To receive the grace of God in vain can be nothing else than to hear the pure word of God which presents and offers his grace, and yet to remain listless and irresponsive, undergoing no change at all. Thus, ungrateful for the Word and unworthy of it, we merit the loss of the Word. Such as these are described in the parable (Lk 14, 16-24) where the guests bidden to the supper refused to come and went about their own business, thus provoking the master's anger until he swore they should not taste his supper. Similar is Paul's threat here, that we may take heed and accept the Gospel with fear and gratitude. Christ says (Jn 12,35), "*Walk while ye have the light, that darkness overtake you not.*" I should think we might have learned wisdom from experience – from the darkness we suffered under the Papacy. But that is all forgotten; we show neither gratitude nor amendment of life. Very well, we shall find out the consequences.

SALVATION WHEREVER THE GOSPEL IS SENT.

"Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

5. These words portray the richness of the salvation wherever the Gospel goes: nothing but grace and help; no wrath or punishment. Indeed, these are words of unutterable meaning the apostle here employs. First, he tells us that it is an "acceptable time," as the Hebrew expresses it. Our own way of putting it would be: "This is a gracious time, a time when God turns away his wrath and is moved only by love and benevolence toward us and is pleased to do us good." All our sins are forgotten; he takes no note of the sins of the past nor of those of the present. In short, we are in a realm of mercy, where are only forgiveness and reconciliation. The heavens are now open. This is the true golden year when man is denied nothing. So Paul says, "At an acceptable time I hearkened unto thee"; that is: *"I am kindly disposed toward thee. Whatsoever thou shalt even desire and ask for, thou shalt surely receive. Be not neglectful, therefore, and ask while the acceptable time continues."*

6. Second, Paul declares that it is a day of blessing, "a day of salvation." It is a day of help, wherein we are not only acceptable and assured of God's favor and good will toward us, but we experience even as we have been assured – that God really does help us. He verifies his assurance, for his beneficence gives testimony that our prayers are heard. We call it a happy day, a blessed day, a day of abundance; for these two truths are inseparably related – that God is favorable toward us, and that his kindness is the proof of his favor. God's favor toward us is revealed in the first clause, which speaks of an acceptable time; that he extends help to us is revealed in the second clause, telling of a blessed day of succor. Both these facts are to be apprehended by faith and in good conscience; for a superficial judgment would lead to the view that this period of blessing is rather an accursed period of wrath and disfavor. Words like these, of spiritual meaning, must be understood in the light of the Holy Spirit; thus shall we find that these two glorious, beautiful expressions refer to the Gospel dispensation and are intended to magnify all the treasures and the riches of the kingdom of Christ.

"Giving no occasion of stumbling [no offense] in anything."

7. Since this is a time of blessing, let us make right use of it, not spending it to no purpose, and let us take serious need to give offense to none; thus avoiding reproach to our ministry. It is evident from the connection to what kind of offense the apostle has reference; he would not have the Gospel doctrine charged with teaching anything evil.

8. Two kinds of offense bring the Gospel into disgrace: In one case it is the heathen who are offended, and this because of the fact that some individuals would make the Gospel a means of freedom from temporal restraint, substituting temporal liberty for spiritual. They thus bring reproach upon the Gospel as teaching such doctrine, and make it an object of scandal to the heathen and worldly people, whereby they are misled and become enemies to the faith and to the Word of God without cause, being the harder to convert since they regard Christians as licentious knaves. And the responsibility for this must be placed at the door of those who have given offense in this respect. In the other case, Christians are

offended among themselves. The occasion is the indiscreet exercise of Christian liberty, which offends the weak in faith. Concerning this topic much is said in First Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. Paul here hints at what he speaks of in First Corinthians 10, 32-33: "Give no occasion of stumbling, either to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the church of God: even as I also please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of the many that they may be saved." He takes up the same subject in Philippians 2, 4, teaching that every man should look on the things of others. Then no offense will be given.

"That our ministration [the ministry] be not blamed."

9. Who can prevent our office being vilified? For the Word of God must be persecuted equally with Christ himself. That the Word of God is reviled by unbelievers ignorant of faith in God is something we cannot prevent. For, according to Isaiah 8, 14 and Romans 9, 33, the Gospel is a "rock of offense." This is the offense of the faith; it will pursue its course and we are not responsible. But for love's offense, offense caused by shortcomings in our works and fruits of faith, the things we are commanded to let shine before men, that, seeing these, they may be allured to the faith – for offense in this respect we cannot disclaim responsibility. It is a sin we certainly must avoid, that the heathen, the Jews, the weak and the rulers of the world may never be able to say: "Behold the knavery and licentiousness of these people! Surely their doctrine cannot be true." Otherwise our evil name and fame and the obstacles we place before others will extend to the innocent and holy Word God has given us to apprehend and to proclaim; it must bear our shame and in addition become unfruitful in the offended ones. Grievous is such a sin as this.

MARKS OF CHRISTIANS AS MINISTERS OF GOD.

"But in everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience."

10. The apostle here portrays the Christian life in its outward expression. Not that it is possible for anyone thereby to become a Christian, or godly; but, being servants of God, or Christians and godly people, we furnish in this manner, according to Paul's statement here, the evidence thereof as by fruits and signs. Mark his phrase "ministers of God." What a remarkable service for God is this wherein we must endure so much suffering, so much affliction, privation, anxiety, stripes, imprisonment, tumult or sedition, labor, watching, fasting, and so on! No mass here, no vigil, no hallucinations of a fictitious service of God; it is the true service of God, which subdues the body and mortifies the flesh. Not, indeed, as if fasting, watching and toiling are to be despised because they do not make just. Though we are not thereby justified, we must nevertheless practice those things, instead of giving rein to the flesh and indulging our idleness.

11. Paul also mentions sedition. Not that by our teaching or life we should be guilty of sedition against others; rather, we should be quiet and obedient. See Romans 13. Christ says (Mt 22, 21), "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Paul's meaning is that when we become victims of sedition on the part of others we should submit; just as we are not to inflict upon others privations, stresses, stripes or

imprisonment, but rather to accept them at their hands. So Paul heads the list with patience; which does not produce sedition, but endures it. It is a consolation in these times when we are charged with raising seditions, to reflect that it is the very nature and color of the Christian life that it be criticized as seditious when the fact is it patiently bears sedition directed against itself. Thus was it with Elijah, who was accused by King Ahab of troubling Israel and exciting turbulence. I Kings 18, 17-18. Then, when we are charged with guilt in this respect, let us remember that not only did the apostles have to hear the same accusation, but even Christ himself, with all his innocence, was so accused. More than that, he was falsely reviled upon the cross with a superscription charging sedition; in fact, he was even put to death as a Jewish king guilty of opposition to Caesar and of enticing and inciting the people.

12. The remaining marks of the Christian life – patience, affliction, necessities, distresses, stripes, imprisonments, labor, watching, fasting, purity, etc., are easily interpreted; it is readily seen how they are instrumental in our service to God. God will not have indolent, idle gluttons, nor sleepy and impatient servants. Most adroitly does Paul score in particular our fine idle youths who draw interest from their money, have an easy life, and imagine their tonsures, their long robes and their howling in the churches excuse them from labor. All men should labor and earn their bread, according to Paul. 2 Thes 3, 12. By labor, our text teaches, we serve God; more than that, our labor is testimony to the fact that we serve God.

”In knowledge.”

13. What is meant here? With Paul, knowledge signifies discretion, understanding, reason. He speaks of the Jews (Rom 10, 2) as having ”a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge”; that is, a zeal without reason, without understanding, without discretion. His message here, then, is: ”We should conduct ourselves in Christian affairs with becoming reason and moderation lest we give offense to the weak by a presumptuous use of Christian liberty. Rather we should, with discretion and understanding, adapt ourselves to that which promotes the neighbor's welfare. Likewise, when we labor, fast, or when we regulate our sexual relations, we are to exercise reason, lest the body should be injured by too much fasting, watching and toil, and also by needless abstention from sexual intercourse. Let everyone take heed to remain within bounds by using reason and discretion. The apostle counsels the married (I Cor 7, 5) not to defraud each other too long, lest they be tempted. In all such matters, he would impose no measures and rules, no limits and laws, after the manner of the councils, the popes and the monks. He leaves it wholly to each individual's discretion to decide and to test for himself all questions of time and quantity bearing upon the restraints of his flesh.

”In longsuffering, in kindness.”

14. The meaning of these phrases has been stated in many other places, particularly in connection with Romans 2 and Galatians 5.

”By the Holy Spirit.”

15. What are we to understand here? The words may have one of two meanings: First, the apostle may have reference to the Holy Spirit in person, who is God. Second, he may have reference to the spirit of individuals, or their spiritual condition. ”Holy Spirit” may be intended to stand for ”spirituality,” Paul’s meaning being: ”Beware of the professedly spiritual, or of things glittering and purporting to be spiritual; beware of them who make great boast of the Spirit and nevertheless betray only a false, unclean, unholy spirit, productive of sects and discord. Abide ye in that true, holy spirituality proceeding from God’s Holy Spirit, who imparts unity and harmony, determination and courage.” As Paul expresses it elsewhere (Eph 4, 3), ”Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” They, then, who continue in one faith, one mind and disposition, give testimony by the reality and saintness of their spiritual life and by the presence of the Holy Spirit that they are servants of God. For true spirituality, or a holy walk in the Spirit, means to be in heart and mind at one with the Spirit, through faith.

”In love unfeigned, in the word of truth.”

16. As the apostle opposes the Holy Spirit to false sects and false prophets, so he opposes unfeigned love to indolent Christians who in true faith and unity of mind possess marks of true spirituality, but are nevertheless indolent, cold, in fact false as regards love. Again, he opposes the ”Word of Truth” to abusers of the Word of God, who misconstrue it and comment upon it according to their own fancy, and for their own honor and profit. While much that purports to be spiritual has not the Word as source and gives honor to the Spirit at the expense of the Word, the class under consideration profess to magnify the Word; they would be master interpreters of the Scriptures, confident that their explanations are correct and superior. In condemnation of this class, Peter says (1 Pet 4, 11), ”If any man speaketh, speaking as it were oracles of God,” and not his own word. In other words, let him be assured he speaks the Word of God and not his own. God’s Word Paul here terms the ”Word of truth”; that is, the true Word of God and not our own misconstrued, falsified word palmed off as God’s Word. In our idiom we would say ”the real Word” where the Hebrew has ”Word of truth,” ”true Word.”

”In the power of God.”

17. Peter speaks also of this power, in the verse before mentioned: ”If any man ministereth, ministering as of the strength which God supplieth.” And Paul elsewhere declares (Col 1, 29): ”Whereunto I labor also, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily and again (Rom 15, 18): ”For I will not dare to speak any things save those which Christ wrought through me, for the obedience of the Gentiles.” Christians should have the assurance that they are the kingdom of God, and that in whatever they do, especially in undertakings of a spiritual character, which have the salvation of souls as aim, they beware of everything not absolutely known as true, so that the work be not theirs but God’s. In God’s kingdom God alone is to speak, reign and act. Christ says (Mt 5, 16): ”Even so let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” – may glorify him as the worker, and not yourselves. Seductive spirits,

however, come cavorting in their own power, throw the pictures out of the churches and establish rules of their own, without caring whether it is done in the power of God. The consequence is that their work is neither permanent nor fruitful.

THE ARMOR OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

”By the armor of righteousness.”

18. This armor Paul more fully describes in Ephesians and in Thessalonians. Sufficient explanation of it has been given in the lesson for Advent. There is the ”shield of faith,” the ”helmet of salvation,” the shoes of ”the preparation of the Gospel of peace,” and so on. Paul includes them all under the term ”armor of righteousness,” and, in his epistle to the Ephesians, under the phrase ”armor of God,” to teach Christians to eschew and to forsake carnal, worldly weapons for these. He would have them know themselves a spiritual people, spiritually warring against the spiritual enemies enumerated here and pointed out on the right hand and on the left.

19. On the left hand he places dishonor and evil report, in that we appear to men as deceivers, unknown, in conflict with death, chastened, sorrowful, poor and needy. Scorn is hurled in our faces and the reputation accorded us is that of deceivers. The Christian must not only be unknown, friendless and a stranger, but men will also be ashamed of him – even his best friends – in consequence of the reproach and evil report under which he lies in the eyes of the great, the wealthy, the wise and the powerful of the world. He must be as one dying – continually expecting death by reason of the hatred and envy directed against him, and the various persecutions he suffers. He must be beaten and scourged; must at times feel the weight of the enmity and envy wherewith the world inflicts torment. He is like the sorrowful, for so ill does he fare in the world, he has reason to sorrow. He resembles the poor in that nothing is given him but injuries; he possesses nothing, for if he has not been deprived of all his possessions he daily expects that extremity. Lest he despair of his hope in God and grow faint, he must be armed on the left hand against these enemies with a divine armor: with a firm faith, with the comfort of the divine Word, with hope, so that he may endure and exercise patience. Thereby he proves himself to be a true servant of God, inasmuch as false teachers and hypocrites, with all their pompous worship, are incapable of these things.

20. On the right he places honor and good report, inasmuch as we are after all true, well known, alive, defiant of death, full of joy, rich, possessing all things. The Christian will have always a few to honor and commend him; some there will be to give him a good report, to praise him as true and honest in doctrine. And there will be some who receive and acknowledge him, who are not ashamed of him. Life remains in spite of death oft faced, even in scourgings. He rejoices when things with him are at the worst, for his heart remains joyful in God, that joy finding expression in words, deeds and manner. Though poor in the goods of the world, he does not die of hunger, and he makes many spiritually

rich through the Word. Even though he have no possessions at all, he suffers no lack but has in hand all things; for all creatures must serve the believer. As Christ promised (Mk 9, 23), "All things are possible to him that believeth." For himself, it is true, he possesses nothing, and gladly he endures his need; but for his neighbor's sake he can do all things, and all he has he is ready to place at the disposal of his neighbor whenever need requires. These blessings also give occasion for a powerful armor, for we must guard against pride and haughtiness.

21. Thus the Christian is quite untrammelled. His eyes are fixed on God alone . Always choosing the safe middle path he steers clear of danger on the right and on the left. He permits not the evil to overthrow him nor the good to exalt, but makes use of both to the honor of God and the benefit of his neighbor. This, Paul instructs us, should be the manner of our life now while the season of grace continues; nor must we fail to heed this! This is the true service of God, the service well pleasing to him; unto which may God help us. Amen.

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Second Sunday before Lent;

2 Cor. 11:19-12:9



PAUL'S GLORY IN HIS LABOR AND SUFFERING.

2Cor 11:19-12:9

For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise. For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face. I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak. Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also. Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not? If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not. In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me: And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands. It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory,

I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me. And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

1. They who praise themselves are fools according to the views and speech of the world. The saying is, "Self-praise is unsavory." It is forbidden by Solomon in Proverbs 27, 2: "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth." And Christ says (Jn 8, 54), "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing." Paul acknowledges that he had to become a fool, something for which he had no desire, by reason of the necessity laid upon him to praise himself. The false apostles, as false spirits habitually do, delivered great, fine, splendid speeches to the multitude, in their vainglorious attempt to raise themselves above Paul, thereby to make contemptible and insignificant that apostle and his doctrine.

2. Paul was little concerned that he personally should be lightly esteemed and the false apostles highly honored, but he could not bear to have the Gospel perish in that way and his Corinthian converts seduced. Therefore he exerts himself to the utmost, at the risk of becoming a fool by his boasting. But he, in his strong spiritual wisdom, glories in a masterly manner, and skillfully puts to shame the boasts of the false apostles. First, he shows them he can glory in the very things wherein they glory, and in even more. At the same time he declares himself a fool for glorying. He might have said: "Foolish, indeed, are they, and boorish creatures, who glory in themselves. They should feel shame to the very depth of their heart. No true, sane man boasts of what he is. The wicked and the frivolous do that." But the apostle's attack is not quite so severe and harsh. He addresses them civilly and delicately in that he makes himself appear a fool, as if to say: "Look! how becoming self-praise is in myself, although I have grounds for my glorying. But how much more disgraceful for you to boast when perhaps none of your claims are true." So Paul wears the foolscap, that those coarse fools might have a mirror in which to behold their real selves. This is wisely making foolishness minister to the good of the neighbor and to the honor of the Gospel. To the just, even folly is wisdom, just as all things are pure and holy unto him.

3. Second, Paul deals the false apostles a stout blow when he shows them to be ignorant of the grounds in which a true Christian seeks his glory. For, as he teaches them, a Christian glories in the things whereof other men are ashamed – in the cross and in his sufferings. This is the true art of glorying. To this he refers when he says (Gal 6, 14), "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." But the false apostles are careful to avoid glorying thus; for they flee with alacrity from reproach and affliction, rather seeking

a life of ease and honor. They ever would have prominence over their fellows, be superior to and unlike others – certain indication that they lack the right spirit and are not of God. Christ testifies (Jn 5, 44), *”How can ye believe, who receive glory one of another, and the glory that cometh from the only God ye seek not?”*

4. The main point of this lesson is that in a preacher or a teacher no vice is more injurious and venomous than vainglory. It is true, however, that avarice also is an evil characteristic of false teachers, being found hand in hand with vainglory. For the sake of profit, for the purpose of gain, the false teachers aspire to prominence, to honor and position. With them, nothing but current coin will pass, and what does not pay dividend is unprofitable. Any other vice is more endurable in a preacher than these two, though none is compatible with goodness, blamelessness and perfection being required in the ministry according to Paul, Titus 1, 7. This is not surprising, for the two vices under consideration are essentially and directly opposed to the nature of the ministry. The ministry is ordained to have as its aim the glory of God and its promotion. Psalm 19, 1 affirms, *”The heavens declare the glory of God.”* And ministers must, for God's glory, suffer reproach and shame. Jeremiah complains (ch. 20, 8), *”The word of Jehovah is made a reproach unto me, and a derision, all the day.”* The world will not endure the Word. For him who in preaching seeks his own honor, it is impossible to remain in the right path and preach the pure Gospel. Consequently he avoids striving for God's honor; he must preach what pleases the people, what brings honor to himself and magnifies his skill and wisdom.

5. Avarice, too, is, according to its very nature, opposed to the interests of the ministry. Just as the ministry is to be devoted to God's honor at the expense of our own, so is it to be devoted to the interests of our neighbor and not to our own. Otherwise it is an injury rather than a benefit. With the false teacher seeking only his own good, it is impossible for him to preach the truth. He is compelled to speak what is pleasing to men in order to gratify his appetites. Therefore Paul (Rom 16, 18) says of such preachers that they serve their own bellies. And in many places the Scriptures reprove avarice. Let him, then, who would be a preacher guard vigilantly against vainglory and avarice. But, should he feel himself in the clutch of these sins, let him avoid the ministry. For under such conditions he will accomplish no good; he will only dishonor God, seduce souls and be a thief and robber in the acquisition of property. With this explanation, the lesson is now easily understood, but we will consider a few points.

”For ye bear with the foolish gladly, being wise yourselves.”

6. Paul commends the Corinthians for their patience and wisdom in six points: as wise men, they cheerfully endure the foolish; they bear with those who bring them into bondage and oppress them; with those who devour them; with those who take from them [or take them captive]; with those who exalt themselves; with those who smite them in the face. But his commendation is meant to pave the way for his folly – to prepare them to suffer him the more readily. He would say, *”Since you suffer so much from them who injure you – and you are wise in that – I trust you will bear with me who have wrought you only good, when I act the fool for a little; particularly when my object in it is your good – to*

preserve the Gospel among you in opposition to the false apostles.” Note how tenderly and patiently he deals with the Corinthians when he might have severely reproved them for tolerating the false apostles. He commends them as does a father a timid child, and yet, while commending them he censures both them and their false teachers. He handles them as tenderly as if he held a raw egg in his hand, in order not to distract or terrify them.

7. Paul delivers a masterly stroke when with the same words he praises the Corinthians and rebukes them and their false apostles. His commendation of their patience is in reality reproof, blows and wounds for the false teachers. He would say: "I have preached the Gospel to you at my own expense and jeopardy. By my labor have ye attained to its blessing. Ye have done nothing for me in return, and I have been no tax upon you. Now, upon my departure, others come and exploit you, and seek honor and profit from my labor. They would be your masters and I am to be ignored. They boast as if the accomplishment were all theirs. Of these ye must be disciples and pupils. Their preaching ye must accept, while my Gospel must become odious. My case is that of the bee who labors to make honey and then the idle drones and the earthworms come and consume the sweet not of their making. In me is illustrated Christ's proverb (Jn 4, 37), 'one soweth, and another reapeth.' Continually one enters into the fruits of another's labor. One must toil and incur danger, while another reaps the benefit in security.

8. "Ye can suffer these false apostles, though they be fools and teach only foolishness. In this ye display wisdom and patience. But ye do not so suffer me, who taught you true wisdom. Nor do ye permit me much enjoyment of my labor. Further, ye can permit them to make servants of you, to be your lords and to order you to do their bidding. And ye obey. But I who have made myself your servant, I who have served you without profit to myself, that ye might be lords with Christ, must now be ignored and all my labors be lost. They rule you at their pleasure, and their pleasure is all they consult. You suffer yourselves to be devoured. That is, your property is consumed; for ye bestow it upon them abundantly, as Psalm 14, 4 has it, 'Who eat up my people.' Upon such as these ye can shower goods and gifts, and can permit them to devour you as they please. But I have never enjoyed aught of your property. All my service has been without recompense, that ye might become rich in Christ. *"Again, ye suffer the false teachers to take from you beyond your consent; to exalt themselves above you, to esteem themselves better than you and me, and to exercise their arrogance upon you. But ye deal not so with me, who have sacrificed my own substance, and have taken from others, that I might bring the Gospel to you; who have not exalted myself above any, but have yielded to all and served them. The false apostles permit you to serve them; in fact, trample you beneath their feet. They even smite you in the face; that is, they reproach you publicly, put you to shame, and abuse you with rude and insolent words. They act as if ye were beasts of burden and they your real masters. All this ye suffer. But my patience with you, my parental tenderness, past and present, is remembered no more. Paul is now represented as having wrought no good at Corinth."*

PAUL'S DESCRIPTION OF FALSE TEACHERS.

9. Note the master hand wherewith Paul portrays the character of false teachers, showing how they betray their avarice and ambition. First, they permit true teachers to lay the foundation and perform the labor; then they come and desire to do the work over, to reap the honors and the benefits. They bring about that the name and the work of the true teachers receive no regard and credit; what they themselves have brought – that is the thing. They make the poor, simple-minded people to stare open-mouthed while they win them with flowery words and seduce them with fair speeches, as mentioned in Romans 16, 18. These are the idle drones that consume the honey they will not and cannot make. That this was the condition of affairs at Corinth is very clear from this epistle-indeed, from both epistles. Paul continually refers to others having followed him and built upon the foundation he has laid. Messengers of the devil, he terms them.

10. And such false teachers have the good fortune that all their folly is tolerated, even though the people realize how these act the fool, and rather rudely at that. They have success with it all, and people bear with them. But no patience is to be exercised toward true teachers! Their words and their works are watched with the intent of entrapping them, as complained of in Psalm 17, 9 and elsewhere. When only apparently a mote is found, it is exaggerated to a very great beam. No toleration is granted. There is only judgment, condemnation and scorn. Hence the office of preaching is a grievous one. He who has not for his sole motive the benefit of his neighbor and the glory of God, cannot continue therein. The true teacher must labor, and permit others to have the honor and profit of his efforts, while he receives injury and derision for his reward. Here the saying holds true: "To love without guerdon, nor wearying of the burden." Only the Spirit of God can inspire such love. To flesh and blood it is impossible. Paul here scores the false prophets when he says, "Ye suffer fools gladly"; in other words, *"I know the false preachers often act as fools, nor can they help it, because their teaching is false; yet ye excuse them."*

11. In the second place such teachers are disposed to bring the people into downright bondage and to bind their conscience by forcing laws upon them and teaching work-righteousness. The effect is that fear impels them to do what has been pounded into them, as if they were bondslaves, while their teachers command fear and attention. But the true teachers, they who give us freedom of conscience and create us lords, we soon forget, even despise. The dominion of false teachers is willingly tolerated and patiently endured; indeed, it is given high repute. All those conditions are punishments sent by God upon them who do not receive the Gospel with love and gratitude. Christ says (Jn 5, 43): "I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye shall receive." The Pope, with his spiritual office, became our lord, and we became his captives, through his doctrine of human works. And our present-day schismatics pursue the same object with their fanciful doctrine concerning their works.

12. In the third place, false teachers flay their disciples to the bone, and cut them out of house and home, but even this is taken and endured. Such, I opine, has been our experience

under the Papacy. But true preachers are even denied their bread. Yet this all perfectly squares with justice! For, since men fail to give unto those from whom they receive the Word of God, and permit the latter to serve them at their own expense, it is but fair they should give the more unto preachers of lies, whose instruction redounds to their injury. What is withheld from Christ must be given in tenfold proportion to the devil. They who refuse to give the servant of the truth a single thread, must be oppressed by liars.

13. Fourth, false apostles forcibly take more than is given them. They seize whatever and whenever they can, thus enhancing their insatiable avarice. This, too, is excused in them. Thus, the great establishments of the Pope did not suffice for him; with various artifices, bulls, laws and indulgences, he has brought under his power land and people and all they possess, exhausting the world by usury. And so it should be, for this state of affairs was richly deserved by men for despising the Gospel and its preachers.

14. Fifth, these deceitful teachers, not satisfied with having acquired our property, must exalt themselves above us and lord it over us. Not only do they possess all property, but they must for that very reason become our superiors; must have precedence and receive honor. We bow our knees before them, worship them and kiss their feet. And we suffer it all, yes, with fearful reverence regard it just and right. And it is just and right, for why did we not honor the Gospel by accepting and preserving it?

15. Sixth, our false apostles justly reward us by smiting us in the face. That is, they consider us inferior to dogs; they abuse us, and treat us as foot-rags. I venture to say we became sensible of such treatment when, under the Papacy, we were readily put in the van, cursed, condemned and delivered to the devil. We endured it all, suffered most patiently, and yielded up property, honor, body and soul. Fault in a sincere teacher, however, could by no means be tolerated. Very well, then; God is just, and it is his judgment that we must honor the messengers of Satan a thousand times more than his own, and do and suffer everything.

"I speak by way of disparagement [speak as concerning reproach], as though we had been weak."

16. There are two ways of interpreting this sentence: First, as meaning: "I speak as one of the weak whose folly you must endure; for which I deserve reproach, since I ought to bear with you." From such meaning I to this day have seen no cause to swerve. The other interpretation is: "I speak as one reproached- after the manner of the weak." Or, more fully expressed: "I can speak in two ways of myself and my class: First, with honor, because of our strength in the sight of God and the spiritually- minded, worthy of honor, noble; not weak but strong, able. But I will not at present employ this way, for we are now despised; we are not known as honorable. And all because of the false prophets. I will, then, present myself in the other light, as I am regarded – despised, held in reproach and disrespect, weak and incapable. But even this condition shall be an occasion of glory for me; my reproach and weakness is more honorable than their honor, power and strength. What

would my glory be should my actual strength inspire my speech! "Weakness," according to Paul's own later interpretation, implies being regarded worthless, unfit, a failure. The apostle's meaning, then, is: *"I, too, will be one of the boasting fools. You will excuse it in me for I speak from the standpoint of my critics, that of a man contemptible, foolish, incompetent. Before God, however, I feel that I am a quite different being."*

17. And recollect, Paul says, "Because ye are wise, ye suffer fools gladly," implying that one fool cannot tolerate another. The saying is, "Two fools in one house will not do." Reason and wisdom are required, to bear with another's infirmities and to excuse them.

"Yet whereinsoever any is bold."

18. That is, in whatever the false apostles can boast, I can likewise glory. Here we are shown what is the ground of the false apostles' boasting: their outward respectability – being of Abraham's seed, children of Israel, Christ's preachers. Therein they think to far excel the Corinthians, claiming their doctrine and works to be of greater weight because they have Moses and the prophets for their teachers. But they failed to perceive that their boast is of mere externals, that render no one righteous or better before God. The majority of the Hebrews, of the Israelites, of the seed of Abraham, and of the preachers of Christ are lost. Names are of no consequence; they only make a fine show and serve to seduce the simple-minded. Paul boasts of his origin and yet derides his boasting, calling it fool's work. His object is to destroy the boasting of the false prophets, that the people might not be deceived.

19. Note how, even in Paul's time, great men erred concerning the true sense of the Gospel, and many noble preachers would have estimated Christian life by a merely external appearance and name. The true spiritual preachers must have been few. Should it be strange, then, that in our time sincere preachers are not numerous, and that the majority of ministers riot in what they themselves seem and do? It cannot and shall not be otherwise. The thievish drones, which are prone to riot, let them riot! We will resist to the utmost of our power, commending the matter to God, who doubtless will grant us sufficient honor and profit, both temporally and eternally, though we must labor gratuitously, accepting injury and derision as our reward. Our adversaries will not long continue their persecutions, for, as Paul says just preceding our lesson, they will eventually receive their deserts.

20. Again, Paul boasts of certain temporal afflictions wherein he excels the false apostles, who suffer nothing, for the sake of either the word or of souls, but only boast of name and person. Among the afflictions he mentions, he names having been a night and a day in the deep. Some refer this allusion to the voyage of which Luke writes (Acts 27, 20-21), when for fourteen days Paul and his companions ate nothing and saw never a star, being day and night continually covered by the surges and waves of the sea. Others think Paul was, like Jonah, personally sunk into the deep sea, though but for a day and a night. Such is the clear

meaning of the text. Yet others interpret it as having reference to a prison or dungeon, because the Greek text makes no mention of the sea—simply *“the deep.”*

“Who is weak, and I am not weak?”

21. Of external afflictions affecting not his own person, but distressing others, Paul mentions two: he is weak if another is weak, and burns if another is offended. Thereby he plainly portrays the ardor of his heart – how full of love he is; the defects and sorrows of others pain him as his own. By “weakness,” I imagine, he means, not bodily infirmity, but weakness of faith. He refers to those who, young in the faith, have a tender and frail conscience, thereby betokening immaturity and feebleness of faith. He says (Rom 14, 2), “He that is weak eateth herbs”; and in First Corinthians 8, 12, that we sin against Christ if we wound a weak conscience. These weak ones Paul does not reject. He receives them and conducts himself as if he, too, were weak. He asserts (I Cor 9, 22), *“To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak.”*

22. This interpretation of the sentence is borne out in his allusion to “that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches.” Paul would say: “I exert myself, I have a continual care, I urge and admonish constantly, that offenses and false doctrine may not invade and destroy my planting; may not violate and ruin the weak consciences. As seen in his epistle to the Corinthians, directed against the false apostles, and in that to the Thessalonians, such is his vigilant anxiety to guard them from the tempter that he sends them a special messenger, and he exultingly declares it is life to him to learn of their steadfastness.

23. Likewise, by the assertion that he burns, we are to understand that he is exceedingly grieved and pained if one is offended; that is, if through misleading doctrines or examples one in any wise falls from the faith. Of the offense to faith, he says much in Romans 14. Not desiring to be offended with the offended, as he became weak with the weak, he says: *“I burn and sorrow for them.”*

“I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago:”

24. Of the translation of Paul into the third heaven many have written, perplexing themselves over what constituted the first, second and third heavens, and the paradise. Paul himself, who had the experience, does not tell, and declares no man can tell, for none may utter the words he heard. Therefore, we must humbly acknowledge we do not know the nature of these things. And it matters not. Paul does not boast of his experience for the purpose of imparting knowledge to us or of enabling us to duplicate it. The purpose of his boasting is simply to stop the mouths of the fanatics and to show how paltry was their glory in comparison with his own. Certain it is, however, that Paul was ravished from this life into a life ineffable; otherwise his expression would be meaningless.

PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH AND HUMILITY.

“There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan.”

25. And must this mighty apostle, O merciful God, be subject to trials lest he exalt himself because of his great revelations? Then how should others, how should such infirm beings as we, be free from self-exaltation? Many teachers have explained Paul's thorn to be the temptations of the flesh. The Latin text is responsible for this interpretation; it reads, "stimulus carnis," a spear, or thorn for the flesh. Yet that rendering does not do justice to the words. Paul is not in the habit of terming temptations of the flesh "thorns." The thorn stands rather for something painful and afflicting. In "a thorn of the flesh" the thought is not of an instrumentality whereby the flesh stings, but of something that stings the flesh. The Greek text impels us to the thought of a thorn for the flesh, or a thorn upon or in the flesh. The idea is much like that in the German proverb, "*The clog is bound to the dog's neck.*" We may imagine Paul expressing himself: "*As a clog to a dog's neck, as a ring in a bear's nose, a bit in a horse's mouth or a gag in the mouth of a swine, in order to restrain them from running, biting and general mischief, – so is my thorn a clog to my body lest I exalt myself.*"

26. But Paul himself explains the nature of the clog, or thorn. He calls it "a messenger of Satan," a devil, to "buffet" him, or to flay and jog him. Hence a spiritual trial cannot be meant. The explanation appeals to me that the persecutions and sufferings the apostle recounts above constitute the devil's flaying. Thus his meaning would be: "*I have received great revelations, for which reason the clog is bound to the dog; that is, the many dangers and misfortunes with which the angel of the devil buffets and humiliates my body will make me forget to exalt myself. They are the thorn in my flesh, or upon my body; for God will not permit it to come upon my soul.*"

27. Yet the text seems to imply some peculiar work of the devil upon Paul's body, for it says the thorn, or clog, is the messenger Satan employs to beat his body; and also that the apostle diligently but unavailingly thrice besought the Lord to remove it. I do not imagine him praying for the cessation of persecutions in a spirit of unwillingness to suffer them. But since he does not specify the affliction, we must let it remain a secret one, a distress known only to himself. It is enough for us to know that while God had given him great revelations, revelations beyond human ken, he also bound the clog to him – gave him a thorn for his body – to prevent his exaltation of himself; and that the knowledge of the buffetings and flaying caused by this clog, or devil, are likewise beyond human ken.


"My power is made perfect in weakness."

28. It is a strange sort of strength which is weak and by its weakness grows stronger. Who ever heard of weak strength? or more absurd still, that strength is increased by weakness? Paul would here make a distinction between human strength and divine. Human strength increases with enhancement and decreases with enfeeblement. But God's power – his Word in us – rises in proportion to the pressure it receives. It is characteristic of God the Creator that he creates all things from naught, and again reduces to naught all created things. Human power cannot do this. The power of God is the true palm-wood which buoys itself in proportion as it is burdened and weighted.

29. Note here, "weakness" is not to be understood in a spiritual sense, as on a previous occasion, but externally; as not illness alone, but every sort of evil, misfortune, suffering and persecution calculated to buffet and humble the body. The power of Christ, in connection with which spiritual weakness cannot exist, is invoked against this weakness likewise. He says, "Most gladly will I glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." And his weaknesses he immediately explains as infirmities, injuries, necessities, persecutions and distresses. The thought, then, is: Christ is not mighty within us, his word and his faith are not strong in us, unless our bodies suffer affliction. The false apostles, however, take excellent care to escape suffering.

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before Lent
2 Cor. 11:19-12:9