1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: 2 Corinthians
Theme: Character

Overview: We move from a study of 1 Corinthians to a study of 2 Corinthians. Scholars debate how many letters were written to this troubled church (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9; 10:9-10). But the completed canon of the New Testament includes these two. The word *troubles* could be used to summarize 1 Corinthians. Second Corinthians could be summarized with the word *character*. Someone said, "Reputation is what others think of you; character is what you really are." Paul did not have the best reputation, but he did have outstanding character; his character is on display in 2 Corinthians. Students will learn that integrity, perseverance, hope, and generosity are key qualities of character.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Author

The apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, joined in the greeting by "Timothy our brother" (2 Corinthians 1:1). Paul had planted the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-11), and this is the most personal of his letters—revealing his heart as a minister, his sufferings, and his deep love for the believers there.

Audience

Paul wrote "to the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia" (2 Corinthians 1:1). Since his earlier letter, some in Corinth had questioned his integrity and his authority as an apostle, while others had responded to his correction with repentance (2 Corinthians 7:8-12; 10:10).

Date

Paul likely wrote 2 Corinthians around AD 55–56 from Macedonia, after Titus met him there with encouraging news about the church (2 Corinthians 2:12-13; 7:5-7). It was written during his third missionary journey, not long after 1 Corinthians.

Setting

Paul was traveling through Macedonia and Achaia while gathering an offering from the Gentile churches for the poor believers in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9; Romans 15:25-26). Meanwhile, rival teachers—whom Paul sarcastically called "super-apostles"—were challenging his ministry in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:5).

Theme

Second Corinthians could be summarized with the word *character*. Paul defended his ministry not by pointing to his reputation or credentials but by pointing to his integrity, his perseverance through suffering, his hope in what God has prepared, and the generosity that flows from God's grace. God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Why Study 2 Corinthians?

Reputation is what others think of us; character is what we really are. This study helps believers build trust by living with integrity, keep going when life presses hard, fix their eyes on what is unseen and eternal, share the ministry of reconciliation, and give generously and cheerfully because Christ gave himself for us.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: 2 Corinthians 1:12-24; 2:12-17

WEEK 2: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18; 11:23-31

WEEK 3: 2 Corinthians 5:1-21

WEEK 4: 2 Corinthians 8:1-12; 9:6-15

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **As God is faithful, make your word "yes" or "no," but not both.**

STUDY: 2 Corinthians

THEME: Character

LESSON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 1:12-24; 2:12-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Corinthians 4:2

INTEGRITY

BY MARK SCOTT

Integrity means to live only one life. It means to be consistent, not a vacillator or one who is fickle. It means to be unmixed, uncompromised, and ethically honest. Integrity is a moral compass. The apostle Paul experienced unjustified criticism of his integrity from the church in Corinth.

After the opening greeting of this Epistle (2 Corinthians 1:1-2), Paul praised God for the comfort that he gives his people (1:3-7). Paul himself needed that comfort because of the afflictions he had to endure (1:8-11). One such affliction Paul had to endure was to often be misunderstood by the people he desired to serve. So, in verse 12, Paul began to defend his ministerial integrity.

Change of Plans Does Not Equal Lack of Integrity

2 Corinthians 1:12-17, 23-24

Paul's critics took undue advantage of him when he changed his plans. They pointed to those changed plans as evidence of dishonesty. Paul's defense was to say that his life was an open book. He lived one life. He lived with *integrity* (single-hearted devotion) and *godly sincerity* (pure and honorable motives). He did not rely on worldly wisdom. He instead relied on God's grace. He hoped that God's grace would speak for him to the people.

The problem was, Paul was sailing back and forth across the Aegean Sea as he made his way between the churches in Asia Minor and those in Macedonia and Achaia. He ultimately wanted to return to Judea with an offering for the saints there. But his plans were derailed for a number of reasons, not the least of which was his anxiety for the church at Corinth. Paul was so concerned about the church (he could not get them off his mind) that he changed his travel plans (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:13). Paul rebuffed his critics' charges by saying that he did not flippantly say "yes" to things and "no" to things without thought, prayer, and a concern for the church. The language is similar to Matthew 5:37. Paul desired to *spare* the church; he did not desire to *lord it over* the church.

The Triune God Is the Epitome of Integrity

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

Paul rooted his confidence for ministry and his integrity in the Triune God. All three members of the Trinity are mentioned in this paragraph. God is faithful. Jesus is the amen of the promises. The Holy Spirit is the deposit for the future. Paul had integrity because God saved him and sanctified him.

God is not a vacillator. His faithfulness, evident in his *message* (*logos*), was not yes and no. And Jesus and the gospel that Paul preached about him was not yes and no. Before Paul defined the Holy Spirit's role in his ministry, he paused to offer an excursus about Jesus. Jesus was always the "Yes" man for God. In fact, all the promises of God find their yes in Jesus. (That reality may actually be somewhat of a hermeneutical construct in the Bible. Many of the promises in the Old Testament that many people relate to Christ's second coming might actually refer to his first coming.) Jesus is the grand amen of God because, as Christian educator Tom Ewald said, "He is God's dynamic affirmative to every negative dimension of life."

God made Paul *stand firm*, *anointed* him, *sealed* him, and placed his Spirit on Paul as a *deposit* (like a down payment on a house) to guarantee what would come later. If God was behind Paul's ministry, then that ministry must be filled with integrity.

Concern for Followers Is Evidence of Integrity

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

A hireling or false teacher would care nothing about his followers, but Paul was genuinely and deeply concerned about the Corinthian believers. In fact, he was so concerned that even though God had provided him an *open door* (for evangelism?), his spirit was restless. Paul was going through Macedonia to see the Corinthians when he ran into Titus (see 2 Corinthians 7:6).

Titus brought Paul such a good word about the Corinthians that Paul broke out in praise to God in a several-chapter discourse about the ministry of the new covenant, the nature of the ministry of reconciliation, and the suffering that the gospel brings to its workers (2:14—7:16). Using the imagery of a Roman army returning from a victorious battle, Paul spoke about the *aroma* of God in the gospel. It is a good aroma to those who are saved, but a bad aroma to those who are lost. That means some will embrace the message while others will not. But Paul's mind was pure and his conscience was clear. He did not *peddle* the word of God for profit (as some did). He served God with sincerity and integrity.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

HOW TO BUILD TRUST—AND DAMAGE IT

BY DAVID FAUST

A young minister sent me an e-mail with a request. "I've been going through some leadership coaching," he wrote, "and one question my coach asked me was, 'What are some trust builders and breakers for you?'" My friend wondered how I would answer that question.

Trust Breakers

I wrote back, and my list of trust breakers included:

- **Lying or being two-faced.** Any form of dishonesty weakens trust. We shouldn't conduct ourselves one way in public but act differently in private and show different "faces" to different people. Our actions should match our words.
- **Unreliability and inconsistency.** Trust decreases if we make promises we don't fulfill and say we'll do something, but don't follow through. For example, it damages trust if we don't show up on time for scheduled meetings, as if our time is more important than everyone else's. It's hard to follow inconsistent, unpredictable leaders who switch their vision frequently, so others don't know what to expect or what they'll come up with next.
- **Blaming.** It weakens trust if we refuse to accept responsibility for our sins, mistakes, and goof-ups. Leaders who lack integrity never say, "I'm sorry" or "It's my fault." Instead, they always find others to blame when things go wrong.
- **Pridefulness.** Confidence is a positive leadership quality, but it's difficult to trust people who are so cocky and self-assured they believe they're always right. Arrogant leaders refuse to listen and learn from others. They insist on having their own way, constantly seek the limelight, and become jealous when others receive positive attention.
- **Poor decisions.** We all establish a track record—a reputation based on experience—that impacts how others perceive us. Wise decisions and positive outcomes build trust.
- **Unwillingness to do the "hard stuff."** Trust diminishes if leaders always leave unpleasant tasks to others. It grows when people go through hardship together—when we see our leaders dive in, get their hands dirty, and tackle sticky problems, doing their best under difficult circumstances.

Trust Builders

In response, my friend sent me a follow-up e-mail and asked, "Would you say that trust builders are the opposites of all those points, or are there any unique things that help trust to grow?"

I answered, "Yes, the opposite of each of those items would be a trust builder." Trust grows when leaders are honest, consistent, responsible, humble, wise, and hard-working. Then I added a couple more trust builders to the list.

- **Time.** Trust doesn't grow overnight. It takes time for others to get to know their leaders' character and buy into their vision. A wise, experienced church leader once advised me, "The best years of your ministry will happen after year seven." There are plenty of exceptions, but in general, leaders gain trust if they stick around and gain deeper understanding of the people over time.
- **Endorsement.** Trust grows at a faster rate if some already-respected individuals give new, lesser-known leaders their stamp of approval and encourage others to accept them. Barnabas did this for Saul/Paul (Acts 9:26-28), and Paul did it for others like Tychicus, Mark, and Epaphras (Colossians 4:7-13).

Trust is in short supply today. We need trustworthy leaders who "speak before God with sincerity" (2 Corinthians 2:17). Let's make it our goal to be men and women of integrity who build trust and never betray it.

Personal Challenge:

Think of a man or woman you consider a person of high integrity. What character qualities cause you to trust them? Do you think others consider you a trustworthy person? What could you do to build stronger bonds of trust with others in your circle of influence?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Who comes to mind when you think of someone with great integrity? Why?

Ask two people to read aloud **2 Corinthians 1:12-24; 2:12-17**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. In the first part of our lesson text, Paul defended himself against charges that he says one thing and does another (i.e., that Paul lacks integrity). The person who summarized the passages (above) may have touched on this, but please discuss in more depth the situation Paul was facing. (Refer to Mark Scott's lesson, if necessary.)
   - Why was this an important issue for Paul?
   - Why is integrity an important issue for all leaders?

3. It's not perfectly clear what Paul's critics in Corinth may have been saying about the apostle. But, based on your reading of this Scripture, what might have been some of their criticisms?

4. In 2 Corinthians 1:23, Paul said that "it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth." In light of what has already been discussed, why was "not returning to Corinth" likely the best course of action?

5. In 2 Corinthians 2:14-15, Paul described the pleasing aroma of the knowledge of Christ. It's an intriguing metaphor. How is the "knowledge of Christ" akin to an "aroma"?

6. In verse 17, Paul again defended his integrity. Discuss the possible differences between people who spread God's Word with integrity and sincerity and those who spread God's Word in a less upright manner.

7. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **2 Corinthians 4:1-18; 11:23-31**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **“Fix [your] eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”**

STUDY: 2 Corinthians

THEME: Character

LESSON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18; 11:23-31

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Colossians 3:1-3; 2 Peter 3:8-14

PERSEVERANCE

BY MARK SCOTT

Perseverance (nicknamed Percy) was a car-sized rover designed to explore the Jezero crater as part of NASA's Mars 2020 mission. It was so named because it had to persevere to reach its destination. Believers are also called to persevere to reach their destination. *Perseverance* means to continue to work to achieve something despite difficulties or opposition. It means to be tenacious, determined, resolved. The apostle Paul knew much about perseverance, and he wrote more about this quality in 2 Corinthians than in any of his Epistles.

The text selections for this lesson come from two profound (and larger) passages about the ministry of the apostles and the church (2 Corinthians 2:14—7:16; 10:1—12:21). In the first selection, Paul was quite straightforward about his take on the ministry—i.e., didactic and plainspoken. In the second section, he used sarcasm to make his point.

We Have This Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Paul's commendation from the church came from the fruit of his ministry with the people. Their lives were like letters from Jesus read by everyone. These "living letters" were a testament to the reality of the new covenant which promised freedom and transformation (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). The mercy associated with this new covenant caused Paul twice to say he would *not lose heart* in this ministry (4:1, 16). He was all-in.

Paul was so all-in that he had no interest in *secret and shameful ways*. He did not use deception, nor did he distort the word of God. Instead, Paul's life was an open book. He presented God's truth *plainly* (openly). If there was a *veil* over what Paul preached, it was to unbelievers due to the deception of the devil. The enemy so blinded people that they could not see the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

If Paul said anything about himself, as opposed to preaching Christ and him crucified, it was only that he was a servant for Jesus' sake. Paul's outward ministry was a product of the light of the gospel that moved him from the inside. In a verse of prepositional overload (v. 6), Paul said that God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

We Have This Treasure

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Paul's capacity for perseverance was rooted in the gospel, not in personal strength (i.e., the container that is the human body). He referred to that "container" as a *jar of clay* (or, as *The Message* phrases it, "the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives"). This is why Paul could give four contrasts of being pressed . . . but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

The empowerment in these jars of clay was in proportion to Paul staying connected to Jesus. Just as a jar was used to carry contents (water, for example), so Paul carried around the gospel. The contents of that jar (Paul) were the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since Jesus called his followers to deny themselves and take up their crosses daily (Luke 9:23), Paul knew that being given over to death (perhaps physically) was part of sharing in the life of Jesus.

Paul employed Psalm 116:10 to advance his argument about his gospel in general and the resurrection in particular. Paul knew that jars of clay wear out (*waste away*). But because of the power of the gospel, inwardly we are being *renewed* day by day. Troubles in this world prepare us for the world to come.

We Have This Résumé

2 Corinthians 11:23-31

Paul said, "We have this ministry," and "We have this treasure." He did not say, "We have this résumé." But he might well have said it because so much of the content of chapters 10–12 was Paul's résumé or calling card. Instead of letters behind Paul's name (e.g., BA, MDiv, or PhD), Paul listed trials as his claim to genuine ministry. And the tone of that list was sarcasm. In his defense, Paul used familiar techniques employed by other rhetoricians of his day. In addition to sarcasm, he used interrogation, apostrophe, and catalogs.

Paul's list is long and impressive. Just reading through it makes one feel spiritually puny. Paul listed eight persecutions (hard work, prison, floggings, exposure, beatings [with lashes and rods], being stoned, shipwrecked, and left in the open sea). He then listed eight ways, situations, and places that he faced danger (constantly on the run, rivers, bandits, people, city, country, sea, and false believers). Finally, he listed five challenging conditions he had endured (labor/toil, sleeplessness, scarcity of food, cold and exposure, and anxiousness).

Most churches would think twice before employing Paul on their ministry staff. He was not afraid to list his weaknesses because it allowed him the privilege of boasting about God. His above-board approach to ministry gave him the confidence to persevere.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

WE DO NOT LOSE HEART

BY DAVID FAUST

Earlier this year, I spoke for a missionary conference in Northern Ireland attended by young adults just starting out and older workers nearing retirement. Some of the missionaries are single, some are married, and some are parents and grandparents. Most of them live far from their extended families.

They serve in diverse places (Scotland, Germany, Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, Ireland, France, and the Balkans), but they face common problems. How do you make disciples for Christ in a postmodern culture dominated by secularism, materialism, and cynicism toward traditional religion? Picturesque stone church buildings dot the landscape of Europe, but few Christians gather to worship in those museum-like buildings. Meanwhile, Islam threatens to fill the spiritual vacuum.

The missionaries I met were cheerful and upbeat during the conference. Despite whatever hardships and loneliness they face, these bright, devoted workers are determined to persevere.

Shining in Dark Places

Our conference theme was drawn from the ancient hymn, "Be Thou My Vision." The song's melody comes from a folk tune named for an Irish village called Slane. History tells us that on Easter Sunday in AD 433, the local Irish king issued a decree prohibiting anyone from lighting a flame until the king lit a candle in observation of a pagan Druid festival. To show that only the true Lord deserves praise, the missionary known as Saint Patrick defied the king, climbed to the tallest hill in the area, and lit a fire to honor Christ. Centuries later, the melody of "Be Thou My Vision" reminds us of Patrick's heroism, for it is named after the place where Patrick shined his light: the Hill of Slane.

The song's original lyrics, later translated into English in the early 1900s, were penned by a sixth-century Irish poet named Eochaid "Dallán" Forgaill. After the boy lost his eyesight at an early age, his mother nicknamed him Dallán, which means "little blind one." That's right: The person who wrote, "Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart," could not see, but by faith he praised the High King of heaven.

Faithful—Whatever Befall

How can we make disciples in nations where an indifferent majority shows little interest in God? How can we serve the High King of heaven when the ground-level problems of earth drag us down? God is "the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 21:6)—but he is also the Lord of the middle. He is there to help when we're in the middle of the complicated problems that arise because we're serving Christ in non-Christian cultures.

European missionaries face daunting challenges, but they have not given up hope. Like the apostle Paul, who spread the gospel in first-century Greece, Italy, Israel, and Turkey, these faithful workers "do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:1, 16). After all, Paul wrote, though our bodies are "jars of clay," Christians possess a treasure that enables us to be "hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). We persevere, encouraged by these words penned long ago by an Irish poet who couldn't see:

High King of heaven, My victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Personal Challenge:

Write a note to a church leader or a missionary. Thank them for their service and encourage them to persevere.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Describe the most pressure-packed situation you ever personally endured. How were you able to persevere through it?

   Ask two people to read aloud **2 Corinthians 4:1-18; 11:23-31**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, Paul wrote, "We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God."
   - Why is this the best approach for sharing God's Word?
   - What is likely to happen if a Christian were to try some other approach?

3. What do you think Paul was referring to when he wrote about "this treasure in jars of clay" (2 Corinthians 4:7)?

4. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, Paul indicated that Jesus Christ's mission was a matter of life and death, and our personal mission as a Christ follower is also a matter of life and death.
   - How have you been "hard pressed on every side," "perplexed," "persecuted," and/or "struck down" (vv. 8-9) as a Christ follower? What were the circumstances?
   - How is Jesus' life being "revealed in [y]our mortal body"?

5. It is good for individuals to experience renewal (vv. 16-18).
   - What are some activities or practices that help you renew physically?
   - What are some activities or practices that help you renew spiritually?

6. Turning to the second part of our lesson text, 2 Corinthians 11:23-31 . . .
   - What do you consider to be the worst hardship Paul suffered?
   - Is there a weakness that you are willing to boast about? (See v. 30; and think carefully before sharing your weakness in front of a group.)

7. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **2 Corinthians 5:1-21**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Take comfort that "if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."**

STUDY: 2 Corinthians

THEME: Character

LESSON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 5:1-21

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 147:10-11; John 14:1-6; 1 Corinthians 15:35-56

HOPE

BY MARK SCOTT

Hope is the fuel that throttles faith. It drives it forward, and as such, it is a powerful motivator. Anne Lamott said, "Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come." The gospel is hope-filled, and ministers of reconciliation need buckets of it to continue to persuade others.

In this beautiful section about the ministry, Paul has already stated that we have a ministry (2 Corinthians 4:1) and we have a treasure (4:7). Then he stated, "We *have* . . . an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (5:1, emphasis mine). In hope we long for that forever home.

Hope Sustains Us in the Daily Grind

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Paul called our current address—the human body—an *earthly tent*. Someday it will be destroyed. But Christians need not worry because they have a *building from God, an eternal house in heaven*. It will last because it was not built with human hands.

But the grind is so daily. Now we *groan* (to be made narrow, or contracted, or squeezed) and are *burdened* (weighed down). Our preference would be to go to our heavenly dwelling. That is where the earthly tent will be clothed for eternity. Christians need the heavenly clothes of immortality that can be provided only by Christ. The old life constrained by the things of this world will be *swallowed up* (as in drinking something down) by God's life. God can bring this about in our daily grind, and he has given proof of that by giving the Holy Spirit like a deposit on that heavenly home (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:22).

Part of the daily grind is realizing that so long as we remain on this stained planet, we are away from the Lord. But faith makes us *confident* (to be of good cheer and have courage)—used twice in this passage—that we shall be at home with the Lord someday. Presently, we live in such a way as to please the Lord. This present service to him is rooted in the reality that we must all appear before the *judgment seat of Christ*. Judgments and rewards will be given out then (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15), so this makes the daily grind worth it.

Hope Motivates Us in the Glorious Ministry

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

This section is clearly one of the high-water marks of New Testament Scripture. In a similar fashion as Romans 3:21-26, it marks out how Jesus' death on the cross made us right with God. But in this case that message of the cross is placed within a missional context.

Paul gave two great motivations for sharing the message of God's reconciliation. The *fear of the Lord* caused Paul to persuade others of their need for the gospel, and the *love of Christ* compelled him to help others become new creations. Paul's credibility to persuade others was rooted in his "open book" policy of ministry. He did not need commendation from the church (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:1-3). The church knew his heart. He lived a life of good conscience (Acts 23:1). He wanted the Corinthians to take pride in what really mattered (i.e., matters of the heart).

The glorious ministry is centered in the death and life of Jesus. Jesus died—a large historical fact and huge theological truth. So, in a sense, the day that he died is when all those who accept him also died. Believers died with Jesus (Romans 6:3-4). This death announced Christians' death to self so that they could no longer live for themselves but for Jesus.

Earthly constraints made the people look at Jesus from a *worldly point of view* (fleshly). Jesus was at one time just an olive-skin colored Jew. But when they came to really know who Jesus was, they could see that he was the Savior of the world and the only One who could make them into *new creatures*.

This glorious ministry was all God's idea. He chose by his salvific act to *reconcile* (bring together parties that were alienated) people to himself. But then he went a step further. He entrusted this message to his *ambassadors* (elders or presbyters). A stunning truth is that God makes his *appeal* (encouragement) through people. He still uses people to save people. He has chosen, due to Christ's sacrifice, not to count people's sins against them. God was "hugging the world to himself" (*Cotton Patch Version* of the Bible) through Christ. God made the sinless Jesus sin for us. The result? We could become the righteousness of God. The appeal of this glorious ministry is simple: Be reconciled to God. It is your only hope.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

SOMETHING GREATER THAN THE GREAT OUTDOORS

BY DAVID FAUST

What makes the great outdoors so great? Fresh air and wide-open spaces? Wildflowers and mountain vistas? Starry, moonlit nights? Sunrises and sunsets that paint the horizon with orange, pink, and purple? For me, the answer is "all of the above."

God has given me opportunities to travel widely (a blessing for which I am very grateful), so I have seen Yellowstone's bison and bears, and its canyons, prairies, waterfalls, and geysers. I have gazed in awe at the Rockies, the Alps, and the Smokies. I have seen Japan's Mount Fuji and Switzerland's Matterhorn. I have watched eagles soar overhead while whales breach off the coast of Alaska. I have strolled the beaches of Florida and California, and watched waves crash on Maine's rocky shore. I have seen vineyards in Germany and France where grapevines in orderly rows cling to steep cliffs sloping down to the river below.

Earlier this year I walked through Ireland's Mourne Mountains admiring the same pastel colors, crystal clear creeks, and lush green foliage that C. S. Lewis saw when he walked those trails while writing his *Chronicles of Narnia*. In that forest I noticed a boulder with words carved into its side. In large letters, someone had engraved this message on the stone: "STOP. Look around and praise the name of Him who made it all."

Camping Out

Nature's beauty points to God's "eternal power and divine nature" (Romans 1:20).

A hymn writer suggested these words for us to sing and pray: "Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above, join with all nature in manifold witness to Thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love." As someone put it, "Nature is God's Braille for a blind world."

Yet, ever since the Garden of Eden, the Creator has stamped these natural wonders with a solemn label: "Temporary." Physical science and biblical theology agree that the earth is on a path to destruction.

This world's majesty and misery, glory and gore, dignity and disappointment, won't last forever. Nor will all our buildings, money, and art. Whether we're young or old, agile or fragile, healthy or sick, beautiful or plain, our bodies are headed toward death.

The apostle Paul compared our bodies to tents—temporary dwelling places where we camp out for a while. "We groan and are burdened" (2 Corinthians 5:4) as we await the time when we will fold up the tents of our earthly bodies and be done with them; but we look forward to the "eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" that awaits us in the resurrection (vv. 1, 5). God has in store for us something far greater than the great outdoors.

Breaking Camp

If this fallen world still contains so much natural beauty, what will it be like in the "new heaven and a new earth" where there will be "no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:1, 4)? For Christians, death means breaking camp and exchanging the temporary tents of our mortal bodies for permanent mansions in glory.

So, let's get outdoors and enjoy God's creation, and let's be good stewards of it; but let's never elevate temporary things above the Creator. Nature can point us to God, but it cannot replace him. This world—including its beautiful things—will pass away; but our hope rests in the everlasting Creator who delights in making things new.

Personal Challenge:

Go for a walk outdoors and notice the different ways God has revealed himself in nature. Praise the Lord for being not only the powerful Creator, but also your loving Father.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What is one of the biggest risks you ever took based on your trust in another person? Did that turn out well?

Ask two people to read aloud **2 Corinthians 5:1-21**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. This lesson is simply entitled "Hope."
   - Does the word *hope* hold special meaning for you? Explain.
   - How does hope sustain you and/or motivate you?

3. In verse 5, Paul wrote that God has given us the Spirit as a deposit to guarantee what is to come.
   - How has the gift of the Spirit given you confidence as you "live by faith, not by sight" (v. 7)?

4. (Reread v. 14.) Give an example of something Christ's love has compelled you to do.

5. What is the difference between seeing people from a "worldly" point of view (v. 16) and a "heavenly" point of view?

6. Verse 17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"
   - What sort of changes have you witnessed in people who have become new creations in Christ?

7. To what extent do you share in the "ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18) where you work? In your church? In your neighborhood? In your hobby or during your recreation?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **2 Corinthians 8:1-12; 9:6-15**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”**

STUDY: 2 Corinthians

THEME: Character

LESSON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 8:1-12; 9:6-15

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 112:5-9; Matthew 6:1-4; Luke 6:38; James 2:14-17

GENEROSITY

BY MARK SCOTT

Seth Wilson, Ozark Christian College's founding academic dean, said, "I shovel it [offerings] out, and God shovels it in, and God has a bigger shovel." God provides for his children to be generous (Psalm 37:25; Philippians 4:19). Happy people typically are generous people. Many have found that they cannot afford to be stingy.

Second Corinthians 8–9 is the largest stewardship of giving passage in the Bible. After the rich discussion about the ministry of the gospel (2:14—7:16), Paul launched into this major teaching about giving.

The Examples of Generous Giving

2 Corinthians 8:1-12

Paul used two examples in this text to encourage the Corinthians to be generous in their giving. One example was that of the Macedonian churches (i.e., Philippi and Thessalonica). Some people are uncomfortable with using other people's examples for greater stewardship, but Paul seemed content to do so.

Paul affirmed that the Macedonian churches had excelled in this grace of giving. In fact, at the heart of giving is the grace of God. For grace not only saves and equips; it also motivates. The word *grace* occurs four times in this text. When God gives his grace, the recipients should be gracious. The unusual part of this was that the Macedonian churches were evidently not wealthy. They were in *severe trial* (testing afflictions) and *extreme poverty* (deep poorness).

Amid such dire circumstances, however, these churches had *overflowing joy* which welled up in *rich generosity*. They gave beyond their *ability* (power) and exceeded Paul's expectations. They even *pleaded* (begged) for the privilege of giving—that's different. Paul almost seemed surprised by their total commitment that went beyond just giving money.

Another example of generous giving was Jesus himself. Verse 9 offers a classic description and explanation of the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ. Jesus was rich in glory with his Father, but due to his love, he became poor (came to earth). His poverty brought about our rich inheritance in heaven. This was at the heart of Christ's emptying of himself spoken of in Philippians 2:5-11.

These two examples served Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to follow through on their commitments for the Judean saints. They had made a beginning, but now they needed to complete it. Paul leaned on them by reminding them of their other qualities (faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love). He pleaded with them to finish their work since they had responded positively to the initial appeal. Their gift was to be in proportion to what they had—not what they did not have.

The Fruit of Generous Giving

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Giving helps in at least two ways. It helps the needy, obviously, but it also helps the giver. (Do you remember when Tevya thanked Perchik for the privilege of giving him some cheese in *Fiddler on the Roof*?) Paul did not lack for employing great principles for the churches in his Epistles. One would be the Law of Harvest—that we reap what we sow. Another one is in this text. If one sows sparingly one will also reap sparingly. Likewise, generosity begets generosity.

Giving will bear its best fruit when it is not done *reluctantly* or *under compulsion* (that is, regretfully and out of a sense of duty). It is at its apex when it is done *cheerfully* (the English word *hilarious* comes from this Greek word). One fruit of generous giving is how it blesses the giver. The giver is promised everything that is needed. Paul employed Psalm 112:9 as proof of his point. The poor are blessed, and the righteousness of the giver endures forever.

God, who knows something about being generous, enables his church to be generous. Paul employed an agrarian example to make his point. God gives seed to the sower; later, the reaper harvests the crop and makes it into bread (i.e., righteousness). God inspires generosity that allows more giving to take place in the future and results in thanksgiving to God.

Therefore, if the Corinthians will get on board with their pledge, Paul said, the Lord's people everywhere will thank and praise God. In addition to that, the Corinthians' obedience to this giving will demonstrate evidence of their genuine confession in the gospel. This will bear the fruit of evangelistic possibilities. How fitting that Paul ended this section with a grand doxology: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift."

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

FIRST GIVE YOURSELF

BY DAVID FAUST

The apostle Paul commended first-century Christians who lived in the Greek province of Macedonia because they "gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us" (2 Corinthians 8:5). Those Macedonian disciples modeled an important truth. Before giving anything else to God, we first should give him ourselves—our bodies and brains, buildings and bucks, burdens and blessings, budgets and bank accounts. The Lord is the ultimate owner of everything we possess.

Obviously, Jesus' followers should be generous. But the Lord advocated a level of commitment and sacrifice that goes far beyond token giving. He called his disciples to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). When you're carrying a cross, there's no room in your hands for anything else.

The way of Christ isn't merely to put yourself last, but to give yourself first. God doesn't need your money; but if you give him your heart, your money will come along.

The Results of Generosity

Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:38). Getting in return isn't the reason to give, but it's often the result of giving. We shouldn't give because of what we get out of it; but it really is "more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). What will happen if you give yourself first to the Lord?

Your giving will surpass what you could do by human strength alone. The Macedonian Christians "gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability" (2 Corinthians 8:3).

Generosity leads to spiritual growth. Giving makes us more grateful. It helps us get our priorities straight and put God's kingdom first. It makes us more merciful toward others in need, and more mindful of heavenly things. Paul urged, "But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving" (8:7).

Giving allows us to imitate the example of Christ. He gave more than money; he gave himself. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (8:9).

If you give yourself away first, you will find greater joy in giving away other things. "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Selfless generosity opens a conduit to other blessings from God, which you can use to serve him. Notice Paul's expansive use of the words *all* and *every* in these verses:

"And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in *all* things at *all* times, having *all* that you need, you will abound in *every* good work. . . . You will be enriched in *every* way so that you can be generous on *every* occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (9:8, 11, emphasis added).

Generosity isn't mainly about money. It starts with an attitude of loving surrender that says, in the words of the songwriter, "Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee."

Personal Challenge:

Before you give another dollar to the church or another charitable cause, pause and pray: "Lord, I give myself to you. Help me to love you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love my neighbors as myself. Then, out of a loving heart, let me give generously and cheerfully to honor you."

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Tell about someone who was so generous that they leap from your memory.

   Ask two people to read aloud **2 Corinthians 8:1-12; 9:6-15**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. Many if not most preachers have historically been reluctant to preach about generosity in giving to the church.
   - What are some reasons a minister might be hesitant to preach about giving?
   - How do you personally respond to a sermon about generosity?

3. Paul had previously encouraged the Corinthians to set aside some money weekly to be shared with God's people in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:2-3). In this way, a larger, one-time collection would not be necessary—but Paul's advice evidently had not been followed.
   - Identify some of the persuasive techniques and gentle arguments Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 8:1-12 to try to convince the Corinthians "what is best for you in this matter" (v. 10). Which of them is the most effective?

4. How does giving and generosity help both the receiver and the giver?
   - Why is our attitude in giving of key importance? (For example, giving in a cheerful manner rather than out of a sense of duty?)
   - How will we be affected in the long run if we give grudgingly rather than with God-honoring motives?

5. In his lesson Application, David Faust writes, "The way of Christ isn't merely to put yourself last, but to give yourself first. God doesn't need your money; but if you give him your heart, your money will come along."
   - How has God the Father's example and Jesus' example served to encourage your own generosity?

6. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.