

November 3 Lesson 10 (NIV)

FAITH THAT IS TESTED

DEVOTIONAL READING: James 1:12–18

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 13:1–11

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1–11

¹This will be my third visit to you. “Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” ²I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, ³since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him in our dealing with you.

⁵Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? ⁶And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. ⁷Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. ⁸For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. ¹⁰This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

¹¹Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

KEY VERSE

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? —2 Corinthians 13:5

RESPONDING TO GOD’S GRACE

Unit 3: Faith Leads to Holy Living

LESSONS 10–13

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Restoration Risks
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Examination (2 CORINTHIANS 13:1–6)
 - A. Paul’s Warning (vv. 1, 2)
No Potemkin Church
 - B. God’s Power (vv. 3, 4)
 - C. Know Yourself (v. 5)
 - D. Know Us (v. 6)
- II. Exhortations (2 CORINTHIANS 13:7–11)
 - A. Be True (vv. 7–9)
Where Is Our Strength?
 - B. Be Perfectly Restored (v. 10)
 - C. Be with God (v. 11)

Conclusion

- A. Strength in Weakness
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Athens *Ath-unz*.

Berea *Buh-ree-uh*.

Corinth *Kor-inth*.

Corinthians *Ko-rin-thee-unz* (*th* as in *thin*).

Ecclesiastes *Ik-leez-ee-as-teez*.

Ephesus *Ef-uh-sus*.

Hellenism *Heh-leh-nih-zim*.

Mediterranean *Med-uh-tuh-ray-nee-un*.

Philippi *Fih-lip-pie* or *Fil-ih-pie*.

Thessalonica *Thess-uh-lo-nye-kuh* (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. Restoration Risks

Close personal relationships bring us great joy, but they bring pain also. The stronger the emotional connection, the more we care. The closer and more longstanding the relationship, the greater its capacity for causing sorrow or creating happiness.

Because of the high stakes, it takes great courage to confront a close friend who is causing pain. We want to think that time will erase any relationship rift, but this is often not the case. As with an infection, sometimes the wound must be reopened before it will heal. When restoration is achieved, the relationship may emerge even stronger than before, but we know this does not always happen. When we find ourselves at odds with a friend, confrontation presents a risk because it could end the relationship altogether.

B. Lesson Context

Paul's first visit to Corinth occurred on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). He arrived between AD 52 and 54 after visiting Philippi (16:11–40), Thessalonica (17:1), and Berea (17:10), as well as Athens (17:16–34).

Corinth was the second-largest city in Greece, about 50 miles west of Athens, but the two cities were very different. Athens represented learning, culture, and the grand traditions of the Greeks. Corinth, on the other hand, thrived as a Roman commercial and transportation hub. Scholars were made in Athens; fortunes were made in Corinth.

Paul spent about 18 months ministering in the city of Corinth (Acts 18:11). His initial stay resulted in a church that included Jewish and Gentile believers (18:1–8). Mixing those two groups was not easy, for each had a sense of cultural superiority over the other (compare 1 Corinthians 1:20–22). The Greeks remembered the glory of their philosophers and the military exploits of Alexander the Great and his successors, dating back to 334 BC. It was they who brought Greek culture (Hellenism) to much of the Mediterranean world.

The Jews, for their part, identified themselves as God's chosen people, with an ancient law given to them by God himself (compare Romans 2:17–29). Yet Paul argued persuasively that they had a new, common identity as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13, 27), united under a common Lord and Savior (1:2).

After Paul's departure in AD 54, outsiders arrived whom Paul sarcastically calls "super-apostles" for their claim of authority greater than his own or that of any other apostle (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). These "apostles" tried to discredit Paul (11:5–15; 12:11, 12). Paul was deeply hurt by the Corinthians' acceptance of false teaching, which signaled to be a betrayal of friendship. Before writing 2 Corinthians, he traveled to Corinth to correct this false teaching, to clear his name, and to restore his relationships. The book of Acts does not tell us of this visit, but Paul refers to it as a "painful visit" (2 Corinthians 2:1).

The setting for the writing of 2 Corinthians is quite different from the setting for his writing of 1 Corinthians. In the first letter, likely written about AD 56, Paul draws on his relationship with the Corinthians to give authoritative directions concerning many problematic issues in the congregation (see 1 Corinthians 1:10–17; 5:1–6:20; 7:1–14:40). He does this with confidence, believing their love and respect for him will allow his voice to be heard even when he is not there (see 5:3–5).

By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in AD 57, the impact of the false apostles had poisoned Paul's relationship with his friends. Because of this, Paul had some bold, harsh words for the Corinthians, words designed to put their relationship to rights. His response came in the form of a harsh, sorrowful letter (2 Corinthians 2:4). Paul saw more than a friendship at risk. He feared that a church he loved would turn to false teaching in ways that endangered their faith (11:1–15).

I. Examination **(2 CORINTHIANS 13:1–6)**

A. Paul's Warning (vv. 1, 2)

1. This will be my third visit to you. “Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

Paul uses this letter to prepare the way for his *third visit* (see 2 Corinthians 12:14). He emphasizes the decisive nature of this visit by citing an ancient Jewish tradition: *two or three witnesses* are required to uphold an accusation of wrongdoing (Deuteronomy 19:15). One theory is that Paul includes this quotation because he expects to be vindicated during this visit. He believes that not even two or three people will be willing to testify against him. The Corinthians know him and respect him too much to give false witness about his ministry.

Another theory is that the witnesses do not refer to people at all. For Paul, it is a matter of his refuting three times the accusations against him. These witnesses can be taken as his three visits during which the Corinthians have seen what they need to know in order to establish Paul's integrity in his ministry. This underlines the seriousness of this situation for Paul. He is devoting much time and effort to come to a good resolution of the frayed situation.

2. I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others,

Paul plans to put an end to the influence of the “super-apostles” and their followers once and for all and *will not spare* them (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). Sufficient warnings have been issued; if Paul sees that the Corinthians need discipline on his next visit, he will not hesitate to use the authority he has to administer it.

His warning specifically targets *those who sinned earlier*. He is already worried that he will find this group involved in unholy activities (2 Corinthians 12:20, 21). This may suggest that the false teachers have either turned a blind eye to these outrageous behaviors or even encouraged them, perhaps through their own participation.

B. God's Power (vv. 3, 4)

3. since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

This verse seems to challenge the false apostles directly. Their presentation and demeanor are brash and confident. This contrasts starkly with Paul's usual gentleness and patience (see 2 Corinthians 10:1). The opponents apparently claim that they speak with the very voice and authority of Christ. In so doing, they dismiss Paul's claim to speak for the Lord because he is unassuming in his presentation. The strategy of the other “apostles” is not so much to justify their own teachings through logical presentation as it is to undermine Paul's authority and thereby discredit him altogether.

Paul uses irony to make his counterpoint, seemingly agreeing that Christ speaks through him in a lesser way in comparison to how Christ speaks through the opponents. The real irony is that while they think highly of the power and authority of the false apostles, those fall short of Paul's power and authority. This points to his paradoxical argument that what appears to be weakness is sometimes a display of great strength (see 2 Corinthians 4:7–12; 13:4). Thus Paul is able to insist that his message to the Corinthians *is not weak*.

4a. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power.

Paul’s immediate example of strength despite seeming *weakness* is Christ himself. Jesus’ crucifixion showed him *in weakness*, not resisting his accusers or executors. Although he could have called angels to deliver him (Psalm 91:11, 12; Matthew 26:53), Jesus submitted to an unjust death sentence. This self-imposed weakness (Philippians 2:6–8) was shown to be temporary and even illusory by his resurrection, a display of God’s power unlike anything ever witnessed (2:9–11). The shame of the cross was replaced by Jesus’ triumph over death to life *by God’s power*.

4b. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him in our dealing with you.

Paul’s litany of the physical trials and perils he has suffered in his missionary endeavors demonstrates his own experience (see 2 Corinthians 11:23–28). His many troubles help him identify with Christ’s own weakness in the cross. Rather than identifying with Christ’s glorification, Paul points to persecutions as the mark of a true apostle.

Paul is confident, though, that his personal weaknesses will not determine the outcome of his dealings with his opponents. Instead, just as Christ lives by the resurrection power of God, so Paul *will live* in fellowship with Christ and in Jesus’ power in confronting the issues at Corinth.

C. Know Yourself (v. 5)

5a. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.

Paul now shifts the focus from himself and the false accusations that have been made against him. He exhorts the Corinthians to *examine* and *test* themselves, to look at their own lives.

5b. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

The Corinthian believers have questioned the Spirit-inspired nature of Paul’s authority (2 Corinthians 13:3); now he questions them. Do they actually *realize that Christ Jesus* lives in them? If not, Paul contends, they *fail the test* of spiritual self-examination, thus disqualifying themselves from judging true spirituality and relationship to Christ.

Though the question is framed as being primarily about the spiritual condition of the Corinthians, it also serves as a test of Paul’s apostleship. If they find that they are truly in the faith, then must not Paul also be in the faith? After all, Paul “planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Contrary to his detractors’ accusations, Paul indicates that the root cause of their problematic relationship is not the apostle sitting in Ephesus writing the letter. Instead he suggests that the false apostles rampaging in Corinth are the problems as they besmirch his reputation and gain a following. It is not so much that Paul is saying the Corinthians must be on his side, but that they should be sure they are on the Lord’s side.

D. Know Us (v. 6)

6. And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

Paul’s underlying confidence in his Corinthian brothers and sisters shines through here. Paul knows that he and his associates *have not failed the test*. He is also confident that, upon reflection, the Corinthians will agree.

II. Exhortations

(2 CORINTHIANS 13:7–11)

A. Be True (vv. 7–9)

7. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong—not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.

This is the focal point of the great decision the Corinthians must make. They must *not do anything wrong* but make the *right* choice by rejecting the false claims of Paul’s critics who have painted him and his associates as lacking true spiritual qualifications. Given Paul’s assertion that Christ does truly live in them, this momentous decision in Paul’s favor should be obvious.

Furthermore, the Corinthians should do what is right even if it seems that Paul and his companions are in the wrong. He wants them to choose correctly not for his sake but because it is right. The fact that what is right will vindicate Paul is a side benefit to the apostle.

8. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

Paul now expands his *we* to include the Corinthians. *Truth* must be the guide. The Corinthians must not be driven by self-interest or the charisma of a false teacher, but by a higher standard: truth detached from personal considerations. Rejecting truth will be met with the consequences of God’s wrath (Romans 2:8). Paul would rather be shown false than to impede the journey of the gospel.

9. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored.

Despite the frustrations he has expressed, Paul’s great love for the Corinthians comes out at the end of this section. Paul is *weak* in many ways, not the least of which is his position of weakness due to his absence from Corinth. In this verse, he refers to his humble and unassuming demeanor he exhibits when he’s with the Corinthians.

Paul’s admission of weakness is not his primary interest. He wants the Corinthians to be *strong*. If they are strong in the faith in the ways they believe they are, then Paul has no reason to be strong in his own authority to reprimand them. He can be “weak” as he desires. Paul wishes for them to *be fully restored*, a goal that cannot be achieved following Paul. They must be guided and controlled by Christ, the Savior whom Paul has preached to them faithfully (1 Corinthians 15:1–8).

B. Be Perfectly Restored (v. 10)

10. This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

The picture we have of the apostle Paul from the New Testament is of a man who cherishes his relationships. Because of this, Paul recognizes the personal advantages of not being in Corinth at this time. His frustration and desire for corrective action could result in being *harsh*—the unpleasant exercise of the valid *authority the Lord* has given to him.

Paul does not take his God-given authority lightly. He wants to use it *for building [them] up, not for tearing [them] down* (see 2 Corinthians 13:9). His great hope is that this letter will prepare the way for his next visit. He wants to engage in church building, not church discipline. He does not want to take them back to the most basic elements of following Christ. Instead, Paul wants the Corinthians to ready their hearts to move forward in their quest for spiritual maturity (compare 1 Corinthians 3:2).

C. Be with God (v. 11)

11a. Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace.

Paul ends the letter with five commands that summarize his desired outcomes for this corrective letter. First, is *rejoice*. Despite strained relationship, the Corinthians have much in common about which to be joyful (compare 2 Corinthians 1:24).

Second, the Corinthians should *strive for full restoration*. They should be guided by truth, living and making choices that reflect this “guide star.” In this way they can attain “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

Third, they should *encourage one another*. Paul is confident that this current rough spot in their relationship is nearing its conclusion and that good days are ahead.

Fourth, the Corinthians should be unified. This is very important for a congregation with a history of factionalism (see 1 Corinthians 1:12). Paul’s goal in writing this letter will not have been accomplished if some people side with the false apostles and some side with him.

Finally, they should *live in peace*. never letting disagreements fester to the point of divisiveness and church-splitting passions. This is not a matter of sacrificing the truth (see 2 Corinthians 13:8 above). Rather, it is about laying down bombastic and disrespectful treatment of those with whom one disagrees. Paul will not be satisfied with winning back the confidence and affections of a majority of the Corinthians. He wants them all to respect him and each other.

11b. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

Two understandings of this phrase are possible. One possibility is that the presence of *God* with his *love and peace* is how the Corinthians will accomplish the tasks commanded above. The other is that God’s love and peace will be a felt result of obedience in those tasks. It’s not clear which Paul means. The ambiguity may suggest that Paul wants the Corinthians to assume both: God will help them in their quest for maturity, and they will experience his presence all the more as they strive toward that goal.

Conclusion

A. Strength in Weakness

The Old Testament offers many accounts in which followers of God found victory despite being in positions of weakness (see Exodus 14:26–28; Judges 7; 1 Samuel 17; 2 Chronicles 32:9, 16–21; Isaiah 37:36, 37). All have one thing in common: the God who wins the victory. Even in weakness, God’s people are strong because of him.

We have this dynamic working for us too. We often think that success in the Christian life is a matter of trying harder. Our efforts are important, but we will never be fully mature in our Christian walk through our own efforts. In fact, self-focused striving may block the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Think of your own life. Are you satisfied with your progress as a Christian believer? Are you weak like Christ or strong in your own wisdom? Maybe it is time to “let go and let God,” giving him the glory along with your obedience.

B. Prayer

Father, we are weak in many ways and need your power in our lives. Strengthen us in obedience and love for you and for our brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

We gain strength by trusting in God.¹
