

March 10 Lesson 2 (NIV)

Testing Our Faith

Devotional Reading: Psalm 139:13–18, 23–24

Background Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13:1–11

2 Corinthians 13:5–11

⁵ 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? ⁶ And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. 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. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored. 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.

¹¹ Finally, 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 Text

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.—2 Corinthians 13:5a

Examining Our Faith

Unit I: Faithful vs. Faithless

Lessons 1–5

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How to Say It

apostolicap-uh-*stahl*-ick.

Corinth*Kor*-inth.

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

epistleeee-*pis*-ul.

Philippians*Fih-lip*-ee-unz.

Thessalonians*Thess-uh-lo*-nee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. Self-Testing

Social media is filled with opportunities to test ourselves. We can test our knowledge of history, the Bible, government, and even our personalities and tastes. Self-testing is part of modern culture.

We test ourselves to gain insight into our capabilities. Such testing is sometimes quite valuable. At other times, however, we may focus on such tests narcissistically by interpreting personality defects as strengths. And some self-evaluations are designed to form or influence us as consumers.

Despite these potential problems, testing can often serve productive and valuable ends. We all take tests, need tests, and benefit from tests. This includes, as we will see, the benefits of Christians and churches testing themselves.

B. Lesson Context

Paul had established the church in Corinth during a personal visit to that city in about AD 52 (Acts 18:1–18). We are not certain how many letters he wrote to that church, but there were at least two—the ones we call *1 & 2 Corinthians*.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in preparation for a return visit (2 Corinthians 10:2; 12:20–21; 13:10). While the church in Corinth had, in general, responded favorably to Paul's previous letter (see chapter 7), he knew some problems remained (12:20–21).

At least part of the reason for those problems was that some doubted that Christ was speaking through Paul; they wanted proof (2 Corinthians 13:3). Was he a true apostle of the Lord Jesus, or was Paul a con artist? Some Corinthians thought that Paul's weaknesses—his weak presence and suffering-filled ministry—meant that the answer was *no*. But Paul proved earlier in the letter that such weakness and suffering proved the opposite (much of chapters 6; 10, and 11).

Weakness was how Jesus came into the world, and he suffered on the cross to display God's power (2 Corinthians 13:4). Paul's apostolic ministry had been (and was being) tested and verified through suffering rather than by avoiding it. The power of God seen in Paul's suffering was also seen in the life of Jesus. In like manner, through Paul's suffering and weakness, God's power gave life through Paul's ministry. Therefore, it wasn't Paul's credibility that was on the line. Instead, it was the credibility of the naysayers in the church at Corinth that was at issue.

I. Examination (2 Corinthians 13:5–6)

A. Imperative (v. 5)

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

This is the second time that Paul has challenged the believers in Corinth to *examine* and *test* themselves (the first time was in 1 Corinthians 11:28). The challenge was for the readers to undergo a season of spiritual self-discernment. This self-examination required the readers to stop questioning Paul's credibility and instead look to their credibility as Christian believers.

We note how the word *faith* is used in this context. This word usually refers to one's personal belief (assent) in Christ (John 20:31; 2 Corinthians 4:13; etc.). Included in that understanding is the concept of trust. Therefore, the word *faith* in Scripture typically means belief plus trust (Psalms 78:22; 86:2; Romans 4:5; 2 Timothy 1:12). But that is not the sense here. Instead, the phrase *the faith* refers to the body of doctrine to be believed and practiced (compare Acts 6:7; Ephesians 4:13; Titus 1:13; Jude 3). Thus, Paul's challenge is not to examine oneself to determine how much faith (belief plus assent) his readers have in Jesus but rather to determine whether the readers accept his doctrinal teaching regarding the nature of the Christian faith. The stress on the importance of being *in the faith* is highlighted by the bookend phrase *examine yourselves and test yourselves*.

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

Testing, both self-imposed (Galatians 6:4) and imposed by others (James 1:12; 1 Peter 4:12–13; etc.), is necessary for evaluating one’s status regarding whether *Christ Jesus is in* him or her. The test is not graded in terms of letter grades, such as an A- or a C+. Neither is it graded on a “curve.” Instead, it’s simply Pass/Fail. Either Jesus is in you, or he is not; there’s no in-between. To fail in this regard is to *fail the test*.

While this pointed question challenged the church in Corinth, it seems intentionally focused on those who were dismissive of Paul and unconvinced of his authority. Thus, we detect a bit of “verbal judo” by Paul: those who find fault with him are revealing a fault of their own. They ought to test themselves rather than test Paul. They should be concerned about whether they had failed the test rather than whether Paul had failed it.

Paul’s hope, of course, was that the readers would realize the seriousness of the issue. To *fail* the self-evaluation would be to reveal a life without Jesus.

B. Result (v. 6)

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

Here, Paul does two things to the phrase “unless, of course, you fail the test” from the previous verse: (1) he changes the question to a statement, and (2) he changes “you” to “we.” These indicate that Paul was confident that his proposed self-examination on the part of the Corinthians would cause them to realize who had the presence of Christ (Paul himself and most members of the church at Corinth) and who did not (the minority of troublemakers in that church).

The key to reaching the correct conclusion was ensuring that the proper criteria were applied to the assessment. Paul sprinkles these criteria throughout this letter (examples: 2 Corinthians 10:2, 7, 12) and includes the general criteria noted in the next verse in our lesson.

II. Expectation

(2 Corinthians 13:7–10)

A. Paul’s Request (v. 7)

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.

As Paul prepared for his third visit to Corinth (2 Corinthians 13:1), he prayed *to God* regarding the state of the church there. The nature of the prayer, which we see in the verse at hand, is neither that of simple-minded wishful thinking nor one of mere psychological encouragement. Instead, Paul’s prayer calls upon God to strengthen the readers against doing *anything wrong*.

In this light, we keep in mind that a significant theme of this letter is a defense of Paul’s ministry and apostolic authority. The two main pieces of evidence that validate that ministry and authority were God’s power that shone through Paul’s weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9; 13:4) and the moral transformation of the members of the church at Corinth (3:2–6). For those believers *not to do anything wrong* would maintain their growth with regard to that transformation. Paul hastened to add that this was *not so that people will see that we have stood the test* (that is, for

the sake of his reputation), but *that you will do what is right* (that is, for the reputation of his readers). Thus, Paul is principally concerned that his readers bear the fruit of their transformation and be less concerned with his credentials as an approved apostle.

B. Paul's Values (vv. 8–9)

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

The epistle of 2 Corinthians has been called the least organized of Paul's writings. That's because he often seems to jump from topic to topic in a stream of consciousness. But here we detect an important and well-organized chain of thought: the confidence in 2 Corinthians 13:6 combined with the prayer in 13:7 leads to the certainty that gospel *truth* will prevail. Indeed, the importance of truth is a theme of this letter (see 4:2; 7:14; 11:10; 12:6). One truth was that Paul had not failed any test regarding the validity of his message and authority, though some Corinthians thought he had.

9a. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong;

Paul uses accusations from his critics (2 Corinthians 10:10) and transforms them into an asset. Unlike the apostolic pretenders of 2 Corinthians 11:5 and 12:11–12, Paul had neither sought wealth nor had tried to deceive. He was not a manipulator but one who lived authentically and without guile (4:1–4). Paul conformed his ministry to the gospel, which included his willingness to suffer and place himself in a position of weakness for the sake of others. He was willing to suffer the hardships and persecutions of gospel ministry if it meant strengthening the faith of the Corinthians (6:3–10; 11:23–29). Paul willingly worked with his hands to be self-supporting so that the Corinthians would not be distracted by requests for financial support (11:7–9; 12:13–17; compare Acts 18:2–3). This was Paul's joy. He gladly lived in weakness so that the Corinthians might live in strength (2 Corinthians 12:19).

9b. and our prayer is that you may be fully restored.

We may wonder what exactly is entailed in Paul's desire for the Corinthians' to *be fully restored*. The Greek word being translated occurs in its noun form only here in the New Testament. But in its verb form, it appears five times in Paul's letters. In four of the five cases, it refers to movement from one state of being to a better one (1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 6:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:10). In the remaining case, it refers to the opposite (Romans 9:22). Using the two passages from the Corinthian letters as touchstones, the idea is one of church unity that results from the repentance of rebellious believers.

Paul prayed that God would sufficiently equip them for life in the gospel. Paul prayed that God would move their hearts toward good and away from evil and fully equip them to participate in the ministry of reconciliation with Paul rather than oppose Paul. This is parallel to the kind of preparation Paul described in Ephesians 4:12 or what Scripture supplies to the people of God so that they are fully equipped for every good work (see 2 Timothy 3:17). The perfection described here is one where the people of God are sufficiently equipped to live out the gospel in their lives faithfully.

In essence, Paul prayed that the Corinthians would grow up in their faith. As they went about doing good and avoiding evil, God would equip them for greater participation in the ministry of the gospel as the church became ever more unified.

C. Paul's Purpose (v. 10)

10a. 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 opening *this is why* introduces Paul's expanded explanation of why he wrote this letter rather than waiting to deliver the message in person. Paul wants the Corinthians to listen to the letter's sharp words so that he does not have to exercise his apostolic *authority* when he visits. The responsibility of those who occupy leadership positions in the church includes giving an account to God for the souls of those they served (see Hebrews 13:17). Sometimes, this responsibility requires reproof and rebuking those who oppose the truth (see 2 Timothy 4:2).

Spiritual health is essential, and some Corinthians had lost their sense of the gospel. Some continued their divisive practices, and others had not repented of their sexual immorality (2 Corinthians 12:20–21). If the church allowed such behavior to go unchallenged, the result would be a spreading spiritual cancer, as some would see such toleration as permission. Thus Paul's sharp tone.

10b. the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

Even so, Paul's purpose was not to destroy the Corinthians but to edify them (compare 2 Corinthians 10:8). Again, he states the ultimate validation of his apostleship: *the authority the Lord gave* him. God's goal was and is the making of disciples who grow in maturity (Matthew 28:19–20; 1 Corinthians 3:1–2; Hebrews 5:11–6:3). But when disobedience abounded, and the gospel was subverted, Paul intended to use his authority to tear down evil in the congregation. Yet, that was and is a last-ditch solution, and it was not the response that Paul desired. Therefore, he wrote this letter to prepare the Corinthians for his visit, call them to self-examination, and remind them of his desire for their growth in the gospel.

III. Exhortation (2 Corinthians 13:11)

A. Invitation to Community (v. 11a)

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

Paul concluded by reaffirming his relationship with the Corinthian audience. They were his *brothers and sisters* in Christ. He had not given up on them. On the contrary, he remained connected to them as part of the family of God. Paul loved the Corinthians not only as spiritual siblings but also as their spiritual father (1 Corinthians 4:15; 2 Corinthians 6:13; 12:14).

With such familial affection, Paul concluded this section with five brief and pointed challenges. The first of his challenges is found in the word translated *rejoice*. The underlying Greek also occurs in its identical form in Philippians 3:1 and 4:4 (twice).

The second challenge, to *strive for full restoration*, reflects the content of Paul's prayer (2 Corinthians 13:9, above). Relational restoration is indicative of a life of holiness. Therefore, this command echoes Jesus' imperative to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), although a different word is translated there. We know, of course, that perfection in this life is unattainable since all have sinned (Romans 3:23). But that doesn't mean that the standard should be lowered!

The third command, *encourage one another*, seems to be a condensed version of 2 Corinthians 1:4–6 (see also 2 Corinthians 2:7; 7:6–7). The fourth command, *be of one mind*, stresses the importance of church unity (also Philippians 2:2, 5; 4:2). This can speak to doctrinal unity, but also essential is a shared humility that lives worthy of the gospel. Such unity will achieve the fifth imperative: *live in peace* (see Mark 9:50; 1 Thessalonians 5:13).

B. Assurance of God's Presence (v. 11b)

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

Paul writes of the God "of peace" several times in his letters (Romans 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 3:16). But this is the only time he writes of *the God of love and peace*. The practice of the five imperatives would shape the Corinthian church along those two lines. God had not given up on the Corinthian church, nor had Paul. On the contrary, both were committed to the church.

Conclusion

A. Taking Inventory

Many congregations are in turmoil, and the times in which we live are perilous. Faith is under attack from within and from without. In such times it is important to take inventory and examine ourselves. The contents of Paul's prayer indicate the sort of life that passes the test. Avoiding evil is not enough in and of itself. Evil must be replaced with doing what is right. To avoid evil without replacing it with good is to leave one open to the situation described in Matthew 12:43–45. An unexamined faith, some have said, is not worth living. Paul calls us to submit to a process of discernment by which we try our hearts (compare Psalm 139:23–24). Are we seeking to do good? Are we seeking to avoid evil? Are we pursuing maturity in Christ? Are we seeking to be equipped to do good and participate in the ministry of reconciliation?

This process will be painful but will build us up, not destroy us. We pursue this self-examination with the confidence that we are loved by God and with the assurance that the gospel is true. God is for us rather than against us. We pursue love and peace because God is the God of love and peace. Some have called this goal "the ability to think God's thoughts after him." God responds to the prayers that ask for the strength to do good, the courage to avoid evil, and the power to participate in the ministry of the gospel as fully equipped disciples of Jesus.

This necessary self-examination requires a familial bond, a desire for maturity, a striving toward perfection, mutual encouragement, a shared commitment to live out the meaning of the gospel, and peaceful practices. An examined faith can flourish in that kind of church. Without

such a community, faith will suffer and perhaps die spiritually. The process begins by asking whether we know ourselves. Do we?

B. Prayer

O God, we ask you for the courage to examine ourselves with unvarnished honesty so that we may discern Christ in us. In the name of your Son, who gives resurrection life, we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Testing yourself is not optional.¹
