

This morning, I am in the final week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. After he had started the church and built it up, he moved on to start other churches, but he visited Corinth and wrote letters to them as issues arose in the church. One of the biggest issues was that false teachers had come into their community and were tearing down Paul’s reputation, winning the hearts of many of the Corinthians, and causing tension in Paul’s relationship with this church that he loved so much. He has had to spend a good deal of this letter trying to challenge the Corinthians, expose the false teachers, and restore his relationship with these people he loves so much without pushing them away. We’re going to read the final section, from 12:14 – 13:14, and use that to summarize what Paul wanted to communicate through this letter.

*¹⁴ Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? ¹⁶ Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! ¹⁷ Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. **Titus did not exploit you, did he?** Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course? ¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and **everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.** ²⁰ For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, **arrogance and disorder.** ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged. ^{NIV} **2 Corinthians 13:1** This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." 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, 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.** ⁴ **For 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 to serve you.** 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 that people will see that we have stood the test but 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 for your perfection. 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, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints send their greetings. ¹⁴ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

I want to briefly summarize this passage, and then use it to review the whole letter. Paul begins this section by comparing his relationship to the Corinthians to the relationship between a parent and his children. In their culture, the Corinthians would have been used to patron-client relationships, where they pay him and he owes them some things in return. But he had refused to take any money from them, probably to avoid any hint of the patron-client relationship. Instead, he tells them that he is more like a father to them. Like a good parent, he sacrifices himself for their good. And they do not owe him money but honor.

He tells them he plans to visit them again, and that when he comes, he hopes not to be embarrassed by their failure to have their contribution to the church in Jerusalem ready or by their immorality. He wants no battle with his children. He tells them that the reason he writes such confrontational letters is so that he will not have to be so confrontational when he sees them, but can just enjoy their company.

In v. 5-6 of the final chapter, Paul writes these important words:

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.

Remember that there were false teachers who had come into Corinth and were slandering Paul, and that as a result, the Corinthians have been questioning the genuineness of his apostleship. In return, Paul boldly questions the genuineness of their faith. Examine yourself, he says. Are you in the faith? Do you really know

Jesus, and does your life reflect Him to the world? If someone were to put you on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

It's an important question, not just for the Corinthians but for you, for us as well. So, this morning, I want to look back at 2 Corinthians and examine what we have learned from Paul's letter about what it means to be in the faith.

You are in the faith if you are:

1) Trusting the true gospel and reconciled to God

A large portion of this letter is set out to exposing the false teachers and reminding the Corinthians of the true gospel. In chapter 5, Paul communicates the heart of the gospel message:

*2 Corinthians 5:14-21 - For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the **ministry of reconciliation**: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Wow. Paul summarizes the gospel in one word – reconciliation. What does reconciliation mean? **Reconciliation is the restoration of the relationship between individuals or between a person and God; it is a change from enmity to friendship.** So implied in this definition is that the relationship between God and humans is one of enmity, which is the state of being opposed or hostile to something. In other words, in our natural state, things are not right between us and God. The reason, according to the Bible, is that our sin has separated us from God, because He is holy, perfect, and without sin. We are a people in rebellion, incapable of making ourselves right with God unless there is intervention on the part of God to restore us to Him. And the terrible news about this is that because of our sinful rebellion,

we are headed towards eternal separation from God, Hell itself. Listen to these words of Jesus:

John 3:16-18 - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

We are all on a fast train to Hell, but God loves us so much that He has made a way to be saved: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

The Biblical word for this is **justification**: The legal act of God in which he thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us and declares us to be righteous in his sight (God as judge). But justifying us is not all he has done.

¹⁸ *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.*

He has brought us back into a right relationship with him by adopting us as his beloved children. **Adoption** is the act of God whereby he makes us members of his family (God as Father).

John 1:12-13 - *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

We are not just pardoned but brought into an intimate relationship, where we can come boldly to the God of the universe not as judge or king but as our loving Father, who looks upon us with the same love that he looks upon His Son Jesus.

But that's not all!

¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

He has also given us His Holy Spirit through the act of **regeneration**: The act of God by which he imparts spiritual (eternal) life to us (God as heart surgeon).

You were spiritually dead, but in Christ, God has made you alive:

***Ephesians 2:1-5** - As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.*

It's not that you were bad and now you are good, or that you were ignorant and now you are wise; no, you were dead and now you are alive.

This is what happens when you come to faith in Jesus. Complete forgiveness of sins and restoration to a right relationship with God. Adoption as His beloved child, so that you can come to Him as Father, and know that you are an heir of all that is His. And regeneration – a new heart, eternal life.

That is incredible news of the gospel. But the sobering part that Paul tells us in this letter is that no one will come to understand and believe this gospel without the spiritual intervention of God:

***2 Corinthians 4:4** - The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

***2 Corinthians 3:15-18** - Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

And even many believers are deceived by false gospels, false spirits, and false Jesus'.

2 Corinthians 11:3-4 - *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*

So what about you. Are you in the faith? Do you know God? Have you been regenerated? Is the Holy Spirit in you? If not, **do not leave this room until you have received the Holy Spirit!** And if you are believing anything other than the true gospel, give it up, that you might not fail the test.

Secondly, passing the test is not just a matter of what we believe, but how we are living:

2) Walking in sacrificial love

The one who truly has the Holy Spirit, who has been regenerated, and the evidence will be that they have begun to walk in the footsteps of their Lord. This is not a black and white matter like salvation and being reconciled to God, but is an ongoing process of becoming conformed to Christ in how we live, the one who loved us all the way to death on the cross.

The one who has the Holy Spirit will begin more and more to walk in sacrificial love. This is certainly true of Paul. Throughout this letter, Paul talks often of how he has suffered much in his devotion to God and the churches:

2 Corinthians 6:4-6 - *Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;*

But the problem is that the Corinthians are being deceived by false teachers into believing that Paul's suffering is evidence that he is not a genuine apostle. They have been led to believe that a true man of God would experience worldly success and victory and strength. But Paul wants them to understand that if you're following in the footsteps of a Savior who suffered and died to save the world, then you can expect the same. But in your weakness, God's power will be strong.

2 Corinthians 4:7-12 - *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

The one who is passing the test is the one whose life is being transformed into Christlikeness, particularly in the way we love sacrificially, willingly weakening ourselves to make others strong, willingly pouring ourselves out to fill others up, willingly suffering in order to heal others. The one in Christ labors in prayer for others, gives us money and material goods for others, lays down dreams and ambitions for others, gives up time and energy to serve others, trusting that God's power is made perfect in our weakness. In Christ, the suffering that accompanies our sacrificial love is not meaningless, but makes us conduits of His power and encouragement to others for their strengthening.

2 Corinthians 1:3-6 - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.*

If you are not walking in sacrificial love, are you really in the faith? And if you are really in the faith, then commit yourself to following your Lord in a life of sacrificial love for others.

Lastly, you are in the faith if you are

3) **Living a holy life, with your eyes set on eternal things**

Holiness involves being set apart for God's use. This involves the partnerships we make in life.

2 Corinthians 6:14-17 - *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." ¹⁷ "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."*

And it involves what we put into our body and spirit.

2 Corinthians 7:1 - *Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*

Examine yourself today. What are you partnering with? And what are you allowing to influence you? God is calling you to holiness, to be set apart for His use. And he is calling you to stop living for the things of this world but to live for that which is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 - *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

2 Corinthians 5:7-10 - *We live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

One day you will stand before the judgment seat. And only that which has been done for Jesus and His kingdom will last. Do not waste your life! Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith! Test yourself to see if you are living your life in conformity to Jesus in your sacrificial love for others, in your holiness, in your focus on eternal things. If you are in the faith, trust in your salvation, and then by the power of the Holy Spirit within you, fix your eyes on Jesus and run the race He has marked out for you.

And if you do not know if you are in the faith, pray this with me:

Father, I confess to you that I am a sinner, a rebel against a holy God, and that I am deserving of eternal separation from you. But I believe that Jesus died for me, that you put my sins on Him and offer me His righteousness, a right relationship with you, not because of my good works but because of His loving sacrifice. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. Today, I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I trust in you as my Savior and Lord, and commit my life to you. Open my heart that I might see and know you and live for you. Amen.