

2 Corinthians: A Tale of Two Systems

Background

This is the most personal of all of Paul's letters, providing a unique window into Paul's life and ministry, as he openly and transparently shares himself with the Corinthian believers that he dearly loves. Paul evangelized the Corinthian church during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). He stayed with them for a year and a half teaching them the ways of the Kingdom of God. During his third missionary journey, while at Ephesus, Paul received a disturbing report that things weren't going well in the Corinthian church (1Cor1:11). Within a few years of Paul being gone, the Corinthians returned to their morally corrupt cultural system and the church was a mess—cliques, suing each other, getting drunk at communion, abusing the gifts of the Spirit, sexual immorality. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to correct some of these issues, but the Corinthians rejected his words of correction as well as his authority. Paul's love and concern for the Corinthian church prompted him to leave Ephesus to visit them face-to-face. Again, the Corinthians rejected Paul's teaching and authority, and Paul returned to Ephesus distraught. He refers to this visit as the "painful visit" (2Cor2:1). After this visit, Paul wrote a now lost "sorrowful letter" (2Cor7:8) with anguish and tears (2Cor2:4) with the hopes of bringing about repentance and reconciliation. Paul sent Titus to deliver the letter, and to Paul's great joy, most of the Corinthians realized their sin and repented of their pride. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia in response to their repentance in order to assure the church of his deep love, affection and commitment to them.

Big Idea: Paul takes real life situations and filters them through the Kingdom system to demonstrate how it works to live out the reality of God's Kingdom values while living on this earth.

Paul Chapters 1-7: Paul reconciles with the Corinthians

- Why did they reject Paul in the first place? distorted value system
Worldly System vs Kingdom System
- Real life situations that Paul addresses
 - God comforts us in our pain—emotional, relational, physical
 - Paul's change of plans
 - Forgiveness for a repentant offender
 - Living letters/Ministry of reconciliation as Christ's ambassadors
 - Treasure in jars of clay
 - Eternal vs temporal perspective—fix our eyes on eternity
 - Warning about idolatry—do not be unequally yoked

Chapters 8-9: Paul addresses the topic of forgotten generosity

- Paul zooms in to discuss and apply Kingdom values to a particular, time-sensitive situation. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering and impoverished, and Paul was collecting money for them, but the wealthy Corinthian church had not saved up for the gift that they promised.
*Not really about money; they haven't been transformed by the Gospel which at its core is a story of generosity—Jesus became “poor” so we could become “rich.” John 3:16—demonstration of God's extravagant generosity.
- Generous giving is an opportunity to point others to Christ, resulting in thanksgiving and praise to God

Chapters 10-13: Paul challenges those who still reject him

- Tone and audience changes: Game on! Paul defends his ministry. He meets false leaders right where their arguments begin—in flimsy world system—and filters it all through God's system.
- Paul's boasting
 - Comparing worldly credentials—Jewish Bible expert, firsthand knowledge of Jesus
 - Kingdom credentials—sincerity, sufferings, revelations, miraculous powers
- Strength in weakness—“thorn in flesh” (12:7-10); God's power “is made perfect through weakness” (12:9)

Discussion Questions

1. What spoke most to you today? Is there an area of your life that the Holy Spirit highlighted?
2. What does it look like to be a “living letter” to those around you? What is God inviting you to do (or let go of) in order to point others to Jesus?
3. What are you “rich” in that you can generously give so that others can become “rich” through encountering Jesus?
4. On the other side of crucifixion (death) is resurrection (freedom and new life). What are you currently experiencing that feels like “death.” How can this community support you as you wait for the Lord's resurrection power?
5. How has God comforted you in a trial?
6. God's generosity in your life can come in all sorts of ways. Share a time when you were blessed by someone's generosity and you recognized it as a gift from the Lord.