PAUL, A FATHER-LIKE SHEPHERD

2 Corinthians 12:11-13:14

Key Verse: 12:15a

“So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.”

Thus far in 2 Corinthians we have seen that Apostle Paul served the Corinthian believers with the heart of a spiritual father. Sometimes he was tender, and sometimes he was fierce. His goal in writing was to reconcile with them after an unfortunate division in the church. In reconciliation, he did not try to reconcile with them directly, but he first helped them to reconcile with God through repentance. When they reconciled to God they could be reconciled with their shepherd Paul. In chapters 10-12 Paul deals with the false apostles who threatened the ministry of reconciliation. Paul defends his apostolic authority, not for its own sake, but for the ministry of reconciliation, so that the Corinthian believers may not be deceived but strengthened to hold on to the true gospel.

Today’s passage reveals Paul’s deep concern for the Corinthians. In his final words, Paul reveals his heart as a father-like shepherd. We can learn what it means to be a father-like shepherd and so become a father-like shepherd for God’s flock.

I. Paul wanted not their possessions, but themselves (12:11-18)

In this section, Paul reveals that he did not want to be a burden to them financially, especially in contrast to the “super-apostles.” In this way he wanted to defend himself as well as to restore his love and trust relationship with the Corinthians. Look at verse 11. “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles,’ even though I am nothing.” Paul should have been honored and recognized by the Corinthian believers, for he became their father in Christ through the gospel (1 Cor 4:15). But they did not. So Paul had to boast about himself, and now he was sorry that he did so. Paul knew that those who boast are foolish. But the Corinthians had driven him to do so. Paul wanted to make it clear that he was not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles” (false apostles cf. 11:5,6,13). So he shared with them how God had used him as an apostle. Look at verse 12. “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance.” Wherever Paul went and preached the gospel, God supported him by doing signs, wonders and miracles. For example, when Paul went to Ephesus, he devoted himself to having Bible discussions daily in the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus for two years. The word of God spread to the whole province of Asia. God did great miracles through Paul so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (Ac 19:11-12). Many sorcerers were convicted of their sins and repented publicly, burning their sorcery scrolls pubilcly in a fire. Likewise, God had done many miracles through Paul in Corinth as well. Paul had loved and served the Corinthians with great perseverance. The false apostles were easily angered and would slap the Corinthians in the face. But Paul was patient and loving. However, when the Corinthians heard the fascinating rhetoric through the false apostles, their minds were stolen and they forgot what God had done through Paul.

Here we learn that we must remember how God has worked in our lives. If we are honest, we will admit that most of us were changed through one-to-one Bible study. But sometimes we ignore how we were changed and become vulnerable to people speak eloquently. Even though one-to-one ministry seems to be nothing, it is actually very powerful to change people. For example, Dr. Joseph Schafer began one-to-one Bible study with a Korean missionary who could not speak English well. But he taught the Bible with great passion, often spraying saliva on Joe when he spoke. The word of God worked powerfully in Joe’s heart and changed him into a man of God. Dr. Schafer could not forget how God worked in his life and humbly acknowledged God’s grace. So he grew continually and has become a prominent national figure and an important spiritual leader in our time. When we pray for people around the world, God works in many ways. This is the sign of God’s presence with us and his work in and through us.

Look at verse 13. “How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!” When Paul was with the Corinthians and needed something, he was not a burden to anyone because he was supplied with what he needed by the Macedonian churches (11:9). So the Corinthian church might have felt inferior to the Macedonian churches. Ironically, Paul’s effort not to be a burden to the Corinthians resulted in them feeling inferior. So Paul asked them to forgive him. Wherever Paul went and whatever he did, he wanted to be a blessing, not a burden.

In verses 14-18, Paul wanted to clear up the misunderstanding the Corinthians had in regard to finances. Look at verse 14a. “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.” The phrase “not be a burden to you” is repeated again and again (11:9 [2 times]; 12:13, 14,16). Why? When we look at verses 16-18 we learn that the false apostles poisoned the Corinthians with the idea that Paul was cheating them out of their money. They portrayed Paul as a crafty fellow who caught them by trickery and exploited them. We have received some of the same criticism that Paul received. So we are greatly encouraged by Paul. However the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability thoroughly investigated our church and accepted us as a member.

The Corinthians thought Paul was interested in their money, but Paul was interested in themselves. Paul compared his relationship to them with that of a parent and his children. Look at verses 14b-15a. “After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.” Generally, parents are willing to sacrifice everything they have and even their own lives to raise and establish their children. They do not expect their children to sacrifice for them. For example, Pastor Mark Vucekovich, in order to support his daughter Mary’s wedding expenses, secretly took a second job and worked night shift and overtime, even though he was very busy with the work of God. The relationship between Paul and the Corinthian believers was like that of parents and their children because he bore them with the gospel (1 Cor 4:15). So he would gladly spend all he had for them and even his life. He was not trying to get some benefit from them; he wanted to raise them and establish them and make them fruitful and successful. That is a parent’s mind. When we have a parent’s mind we can spend everything for our children. If they are grateful to us, we can gladly do so. However, sometimes, when we spend everything, they do not love us in return; in fact they may seem to love us less (15b). Then it is harder to support them. However, Paul would do so one-sidedly. This reflects God’s love. Paul did so because he had God’s heart. Without having God’s heart it is impossible to do so.

We are living in a pragmatic society. If we give something, we expect to get something in return. We are very familiar with the idea of “give and take.” We are not familiar with the idea of “give and give and expect nothing in return.” When we love others, we expect to be loved by others. Many young couples expect to love and be loved in a relationship. If one feels that he or she is not loved in return, they terminate the relationship. This is practical love. God’s love is different. God loves without expecting anything in return. What is God’s love? God’s love is unconditional. If God loved us conditionally, we would always fall short of his conditions. But God loved us unconditionally. God sent his one and only Son Jesus to this world to die on a cross for our sins while we were sinful, weak and helpless. God loves his children unconditionally and one-sidedly. We can see the father’s love in the parable of the prodigal son. In Romans 10:21, Paul quotes Isaiah 65:2 to describe God’s heart for his people. It says, “All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations….” Paul had learned this love of God. That is why he could spend everything he had, even his own life. When we are moved by God’s sacrificial love, we also can love others like that. We learn from this how to take care of God’s flock. Bible teachers try to practice the love of God. So they love their Bible students without expecting anything in return. When their Bible students are obedient and thankful, it is a joyful experience. But if the Bible students are rebellious, unthankful, and critical, it is not easy to continue. We can become angry and easily give up. So we need a parent’s heart, that is, God’s heart. Lord give us your heart.

II.  Paul urges them to repent for their strengthening (12:19-21)

Look at verse 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.” Here Paul clarified why he defended his apostleship. He was not trying to win their favor, but he wanted them to be strengthened in their faith by restoring their relationship with Christ and with him. In verses 20-22, when we look at the Corinthian church, there were many problems such as quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. There were many who had committed sexual sin and indulged in debauchery. Paul wanted them to repent before he arrived. Though Paul loved them, he did not compromise with their sins. Paul wanted them to be pure and loving based on the truth. Here we learn another side of parents’ love for their children. It is to help them repent.

We must think about the importance of spiritual purity in a Christian community. The Christian community or church must maintain spiritual purity. It is true that all of us are sinners, but we repented of our sins and we are forgiven sinners. So we have the privilege of participating in the Christian community. However, unless we repent of our sins continually, we will become like Pharisees and we cannot grow as God’s children. God cannot use us anymore. Therefore, we must repent of our sins continually based on the truth. As forgiven sinners we can forgive one another and encourage one another to stand in God’s truth and to grow. Then God can use us and our church will be pure and healthy. This is why Paul urged the Corinthians to repent of their sins when they came together.

III.  Examine yourselves (13:1-14)

Paul wanted to visit the Corinthians for the third time to settle matters among them based on the testimony of two or three witnesses (Dt 19:15). Slander, rumors and gossip obscure the truth. So the testimony of witnesses was necessary to settle disputes. One witness was not enough. They needed two or three witnesses. The very fact is important, not people’s subjective opinions. Paul was serious about settling their disputes and he wanted it to be done justly.

In verses 2-4, Paul warned those who refused to repent of their sins. Paul would not spare those who stubbornly refused to repent. Some Corinthians demanded proof that Christ was speaking through Paul. Most likely this refers to the false apostles or to those who were poisoned by them. Paul would meet them with the authority of Christ, who had been crucified on the cross for our sins but was raised from the dead by the power of God. Paul wanted to imitate Christ in using his authority as an apostle. They misunderstood Paul, thinking he was weak and unimpressive. But Paul warns them that he is coming in the authority of Christ.

Look at verse 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?” Until now, the Corinthians had tested the apostleship of Paul. Paul had patiently borne with them and defended himself humbly in the sight of God. But now, at the end of his letter, Paul challenges them to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith. If they have Christ in their hearts they will pass the test. Otherwise, they will fail the test. When we examine ourselves and test whether we are in the faith, we have no time to criticize others. If we are criticizing others, we do not know what we are doing. If we point a finger at someone else, usually our thumb points up to God and three other fingers point back to us. So we need to examine ourselves before talking about others. “Is my motive pure? Am I acting and speaking in faith to please God? Is Christ’s Spirit in me? Is my intention to build up or to tear down? Am I growing spiritually or not? Am I mature or immature? Am I self-centered or God-centered? Am I doing what God wants me to do or what I want to do?” If we really examine ourselves we can understand others better. Then all slander and gossip and rumors will disappear.

Look at verse 6. “And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.” When the Corinthians were right in the sight of God through self-examination they would be able to see that Paul was Christ’s servant. Paul prayed that the Corinthians would not do anything wrong (7), so that he would not have to use his apostolic authority. Paul was not concerned about how worldly people would see him, his only concern was that the Corinthians would do what was right in the sight of God (7b). So he wanted them to stand on the truth by doing what is right. Look at verse 8. “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” The “super-apostles” tried to exercise authority at random for their own benefit. They were not interested in the truth. However, Paul’s use of authority was strictly limited according to the truth. Paul always supported the truth. The church must be grounded in the truth. If the church loses its moorings in the truth it will become simply another secular institution. This is why we must always emphasize the truth without compromising with people’s opinion. These days many see the possibility for the United States to become a modern Sodom and Gomorrah. It is essential that our church stand on the truth. Our primary purpose is to preach the truth and defend the truth. We have authority from heaven to do this.

Paul did not mind what the situation was, or that he was weak, if only the Corinthians were strong. Paul’s prayer topic was for their perfection (9). As long as they were growing spiritually, Paul was okay. This also reveals Paul’s father-like shepherd heart. The purpose of Paul’s writing was to help them prepare for his coming. Paul wanted to use his authority only to build them up, not to tear them down. If they repented and remained in the truth, Paul wanted to remain as a weak man. Paul really wanted them to repent and be strong in the truth and become perfect. So here we learn that we should not use authority for our own benefit or to rule over others. Instead we must use it for building them up. When we share testimonies in our small groups, we don’t need to comment negatively and try to correct others. This hurts those who share. Instead, we must be overwhelmingly affirmative and supportive and encouraging. Then we can open our hearts and share our real struggles and weaknesses and receive love and encouragement and prayer support.

In verse 11, Paul gives his final instructions. Look at verse 11. “Finally, brothers, good-by. 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.” To aim for perfection refers to striving for sanctification. Our goal is to be perfect like Jesus. Of course, while living in the body we cannot be perfect. However, we have to struggle to grow in holiness and to be perfect like Jesus. We have to grow in the image of Jesus throughout our lifetimes. Paul wanted to restore the love and trust relationship with the Corinthians fully so that they may not be deceived by the false apostles, but hold on to the true gospel. Then they would not quarrel but forgive each other and love one another. Then they could live in peace. Paul earnestly prayed that the God of love and peace would be with them.

Verses 12-13 are Paul’s final greeting. Look at verse 12. “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” In the early church, according to Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) the holy kiss was a regular part of the worship service. However, one UBF staff shepherd said that the holy kiss has been replaced by two by two prayer.

Verse 14 is Paul’s final benediction. Paul blessed them with these words, “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Amen.

In today’s passage we learned Paul’s father-like heart as a shepherd. He was willing to spend everything that he had, even his own life. That is the reflection of God’s sacrificial love. Also, Paul wanted to help them to repent of their sins so that they may stand in the truth. That is the reflection of God’s holy love. I pray that we may all grow as a father-like shepherd like Paul.