

## **“Testing Our Faith”**

**Lesson Text:** 2 Corinthians 13:1-11 **Background Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 13:1-11

**Devotional Reading:** Psalm 139:13-18, 23-24

### **2 Corinthians 13:5–11 (NIV)**

*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.*

### **TODAY’S LESSON AIMS**

- **Learning Facts:** To identify criteria for being “in the faith.”
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain how the imperatives of 2 Corinthians 13:11 are interrelated.
- **Daily Application:** To examine yourself and create a test question that reflects Paul’s challenge in the Key Text (2 Corinthians 13:5a).

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **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.

### **LESSON CONTEXT**

Paul had established the church in Corinth during a personal visit to that city in about A.D. 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.

### **Examination: 2 Corinthians 13:5-6**

Paul challenged those in the church to undergo a season of spiritual self-discernment themselves. This proposed self-examination required some to stop questioning Paul's credibility and instead look to their credibility as Christian believers.

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 Jesus Christ 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*. In other words, deviating from what is considered moral, right, proper or good.

Again, while this pointed question challenged the church in Corinth, it was 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.

### **1. What instruction did Paul give to those who were questioning his authority? (2 Corinthians 13:5)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

How can believers "examine" their beliefs and actions to ensure they are "in the faith"?

#### **Digging Deeper**

In what ways can an accountability partner or a small group help a believer complete this examination?

Regardless of how the Corinthians came out in their test, they are to be assured that the apostle was genuine.

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, his associates, 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.

### **2. What was Paul confident of? (2 Corinthians 13:6)**

## **What Do You Think?**

What are some ways in which we can examine our hearts to see if we are really born again and members of the family of God?

## **Digging Deeper**

Do you have the witness of the Holy Spirit in your heart? (Rom. 8:9, 16). Do you love your brothers and sisters? (1 John 3:14). Do you practice righteousness? (1 John 2:29; 3:9; Gal. 6:1). Have you overcome the world so that you are living a life of godly separation? (1 John 5:4).

These are just a few of the tests we can apply to our own lives to be certain that we are the children of God.

## **Expectation: 2 Corinthians 13:7-10**

In verse seven Paul made it clear that he did not want the Corinthians to fail the test just to prove that he was right. Nor did he want them to live godly lives just so he could boast about them. He did not mind being despised and criticized for their sakes, so long as they were obeying the Lord. He was not concerned about his own reputation, for the Lord knew his heart; but he was concerned about their Christian character.

It was more important that the Corinthian believers do that which was right in the eyes of God than that they should be provided with the opportunity to see the evidence Apostolic authority in terms of discipline.

The important thing is the truth of the Gospel and the Word of God (see v. 8). Paul did not state here that it is impossible to attack the truth or hinder the truth, for these things were going on at that time in the Corinthian church. He was affirming that he and his associates wanted the truth to prevail, come what may, and that they were determined to further the truth, not obstruct it.

## **3. What was Paul's prayer for the church of Corinth? (2 Corinthians 13:7-8)**

Paul encouraged the Corinthians by using the accusations from his critics (2 Corinthians 10:10) that he was "weak" and transformed them into an asset. Paul and his associates were afforded no opportunity to display Apostolic authority through punishment, but by virtue of their spiritual maturity they did not need such a demonstration.

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).

In verse 10 of today's lesson, Paul gave the Corinthians a second encouragement—the Word of God. Paul wrote this letter to meet the immediate needs of a local congregation, but we today benefit from it because it is a part of the inspired Word of God. This letter carries the same authority as the presence of the apostle himself. Paul's great desire was that the congregation's obedience to the letter solve their problems, so that he would not have to exercise authority when he visited them.

## **4. In what ways did Paul encourage the Corinthian believers? (2 Corinthians 13:9-10)**

### **What Do You Think?**

How can believers embrace their perceived weaknesses in order to encourage the spiritual growth of others?

### **Digging Deeper**

How will you respond to the lie that believers must be "strong" in the eyes of the world?

## **Exhortation: 2 Corinthians 13:11**

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 encouraged and concluded this section with five brief and pointed challenges (2 Cor. 13:11). 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 command to *strive for full restoration* relates to Paul's prayer in 2 Corinthians 13:9 and carries the idea "be mature, be restored and fitted for life." *Encourage one another* means "be encouraged." In spite of all their sins and problems, they had every right to be encouraged. *Be of one mind*, stresses the importance of church unity (also Philippians 2:2, 5; 4:2). Such unity will achieve the fifth imperative: *live in peace*.

*Live in peace* was a needed admonition, for there were divisions and dissensions in the church (see 2 Cor. 12:20). If they practiced love and sought to be of one mind, the wars would cease and they would enjoy peace in their fellowship. To be of one mind does not mean that we all agree on everything, but that we agree not to disagree over matters that are not essential.

## **5. What did Paul say to the Corinthians in the closing of his letter? (2 Corinthians 13:11)**

### **What Do You Think?**

How can believers eliminate hindrances that prevent life with "one mind" and "in peace" with other believers?

### **Digging Deeper**

What Scriptures come to mind in this regard?

Our God is the "God of love and peace" (2 Cor. 13:11). Can the outside world tell that from the way we live and the way we conduct the business of the church? "Behold how they love one another!" was what the lost world said about the early church, but it has been a long time since the church has earned that kind of commendation.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **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?

**What Do You Think? (personal question)**

What aspect of spiritual self-examination seems the most difficult for you in your current season of life?

**Digging Deeper**

How will you remember that you are a beloved child of God as you take up the practice of spiritual self-examination?

**PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, 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 Jesus, who gives resurrection life, we pray. Amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

Testing yourself is not optional.

**ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON**

Next week's lesson is "Defending Our Faith" where we learn how to maintain our faith in Christ even in dire circumstances. Study 1 Peter 3:8–17.