

Paul's Final Appeal Regarding His Legitimacy as an Apostle

2 Corinthians 12:14-21

Part One

This morning I know that there are many people in this room who are presently struggling with very important decisions.

There are some in this room who are struggling with the decision of whether to go college or not go to college, of whether to marry a certain particular person or not to marry a certain particular person, or whether to take a certain job or not to take a certain job or perhaps even how to survive while not being able to find any job at all, etc.

Obviously all of these decisions that I have noted, as well as many other decisions that I have not noted, cannot be downplayed for they are all very important decisions. But in having said this, there is one particular decision that stands head and shoulders above all other decisions. And it is will I embrace Christ's gospel as true, and by God's grace live my life in a manner worthy of that gospel, or will I not? And why is this decision so important? This decision is important because it will determine whether or not I will be alive to God or dead to God, blessed by God in this life and the life to come or not blessed by God in this life and the life to come. This is why this particular decision, of whether to embrace Christ's gospel and how we live in response to Christ's gospel, is so important.

Paul understood the importance of this decision. Paul understood that this decision must be made and this is why Paul continuously pressed people to make a decision about the gospel he preached. But before he could do this effectively, those he was preaching to needed to see him as a legitimate apostle of Christ.

Unfortunately there were some within the Corinthian church who had had begun to question his apostolic legitimacy and therefore began to question his gospel message. This questioning of his message, based on their questioning of his legitimacy, was a scary thing for Paul. Therefore Paul, in seeking to protect the Corinthians from rejecting his message which was the true gospel message, chose to vigorously defend his apostolic legitimacy throughout **2 Corinthians**, which I believe we have seen in our ongoing examination of this epistle. So where did we leave off?

The last time we were together, we considered Paul's concluding thoughts on foolish boasting in **2 Corinthians 12:11-13**. But just because we have considered Paul's concluding thoughts on foolish boasting, this certainly did not mean that Paul, in sharing his concluding thoughts on that particular subject, had shared all his thoughts related to or regarding his apostolic legitimacy. He had not!

His final thoughts, or in other words his final appeal regarding his legitimacy as an apostle, which he had been defending all the way through this epistle, were withheld by Paul from the Corinthians until these verses that we will consider this morning, or in other words **2 Corinthians 12:14-21**.

So let me now read these verses for you. **“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. (15) I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? (16) But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. (17) Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? (18) I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps? (19) All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. (20) For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; (21) I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.”** So, what is Paul doing in these verses? Paul, in these verses, in concluding his very lengthy apostolic defense, is making a final appeal to the Corinthians concerning his apostolic legitimacy. But he is not addressing this appeal to all of the Corinthians but only to those Corinthians who still are questioning his legitimacy, which, though a significant number, were not the majority, for the majority of the Corinthians, according to **2 Corinthians 7:4-16**, had

already repented of their rebellion against Paul in response to his **“tearful letter,”** and had demonstrated by their actions that they in fact had embraced the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship and thus his gospel message. So Paul in this final appeal is addressing only the unrepentant among the Corinthians

So let us now begin our examination of Paul’s final appeal that was primarily addressed to this particular group and what is the question that we will be seeking to answer as we move forward in our examination of this appeal? What were the three basic components of Paul’s final appeal to those still questioning his apostolic legitimacy within the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 12:14-21? This is the question that we will be seeking to answer. So in light of this question, what was the first component?

The first component of his appeal was that Paul focused the Corinthians’ attention on the loving and sacrificial character of his apostolic ministry as manifested by his no-charge policy (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). This was the first component that Paul introduced in his final appeal.

So now let me read for you **2 Corinthians 12:14-15** and see if this is not so. **“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. (15) I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”**

So did Paul in these verses focus the Corinthians’ attention on the loving and sacrificial character of his apostolic ministry among them? I believe that the answer would have to be yes. So now let us look at these verses more carefully and see if what I have just shared with you is true.

So how do these verses begin? They begin with these words, **“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you.”** So if this was the third time, when were the two other times? Paul’s first visit was his founding visit described in **Acts 18**, a visit that lasted 18 months. And his second visit was the sorrowful visit that he referred to in **2 Corinthians 2:1**. And now Paul, according to **verse 14**, is speaking to them about an upcoming third visit.

So why would Paul at this time want to go to Corinth for a third time? It was because the majority of the Corinthians had, in response to his tearful letter,

repented. This is why Paul would want at this particular time to go to Corinth for a third time.

And why would this repentance of the majority of the Corinthians have been so significant that Paul would very much want to go to the Corinthians for a third time? Paul would have known, because of the sheer number of the Corinthians that had repented, that what was previously impossible, was now very possible.

So, what might have been some of these things that were now possible that were previously impossible? First of all, because of their repentance, the majority of the Corinthians would now very lovingly receive Paul and his message. Secondly, because of their repentance, the majority of Corinthians would now be ready to complete the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem as they had previously promised. And lastly, because of their repentance, the majority of Corinthians would now be ready to support the shifting out of the rebellious among them, which they certainly would not have been willing to do prior to their repentance. These are some of the reasons why Paul, at this particular time, would have wanted to visit Corinth this third time.

So after Paul spoke to this minority group of yet unrepentant Corinthians about his approaching third visit, what did he say to them next? **“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you.”**

So, what is Paul talking about here when he speaks to them about not being a **“burden to them?”** He is speaking about the same thing he had been speaking about earlier in this epistle in **2 Corinthians 11:7-12**. He is speaking about his ongoing commitment to minister among them at no charge, or in other words he is speaking of his ongoing commitment to minister among them at his own expense. This is what he was speaking about. This is why Paul was able to go on in the verse and say to them, **“For I do not seek what is yours, but you.”** In other words, Paul is not seeking their money, which should have been clear to the Corinthians because of his no-charge policy, but rather he is seeking them.

And why would he be seeking them? He was seeking them so that they once again might embrace him as a legitimate apostle and preacher of the true

gospel putting him once again in a position whereby he might be able to spiritually provide for them. Paul drives this point in the very next part of the verse.

So let us once again go back to **2 Corinthians 12:14** and see if this is not so. **“Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; [And then what does Paul say?] for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.”** He was not seeking them to take from them. No! He was seeking them so that he might give to them. He was seeking them so that he, as their spiritual father, might provide for them what they needed to spiritually mature and become strong in the faith.

And was Paul okay with all of this, with this kind of relationship with the Corinthians where he, as their spiritual father, was the giver and they were the receivers? Absolutely! And he was not simply okay with this relationship where he was the giver and they were the receivers; he was enthusiastic about it and fully committed to it.

Let us go on to **verse 15** and the very first part of the verse and see if this was not so. And what did Paul say, in light of what he just said in **verse 14** about his relationship with the Corinthians, where he gave and they took. **“I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls.”** So was this truly his attitude? Yes!

And where was the evidence of this attitude? His no-charge policy was the evidence. The policy that he had, at the very beginning of this verse, told the Corinthians would once again be fully in force when he arrived on his third visit.

Obviously Paul’s ongoing focus on his no-charge policy earlier in this epistle and here now in this verse should alert us to the importance that Paul assigned to this policy in his ongoing battle to establish the legitimacy of his apostleship. So why would Paul view this policy as being so important in establishing his apostolic legitimacy in the eyes of the Corinthians?

Paul believed that his no-charge policy testified to the true apostolic character of his ministry, since Christ, the one who had sent him to the Gentiles, had also suffered on behalf of those to whom He had been sent.

And doesn't this make perfect sense? If someone were claiming to be an apostle of Christ, what would he need to demonstrate in order to support his claim? He would need to be willing to suffer on behalf of others just as Christ was willing to suffer on behalf of others.

So now let us take this same principle and apply it to those who claim to be disciples of Christ, such as us. If we claim to be disciples of Christ, what would we need to demonstrate in order to support our claim? We would need to be willing to suffer on behalf of others just as Christ, the one we are professing to follow, was willing to suffer for others.

This principle that those who profess to be followers of Christ must be willing to suffer on behalf of others in order to prove their profession credible should be obvious to anyone who understands Christ and what His life and death were all about.

And wouldn't you all agree? So if this is true, then why weren't the Corinthians able to see that Paul's no charge policy did in fact validate his apostolic claim?

Paul's opponents had apparently confused the Corinthians by telling them that the only reason Paul had adopted his no-charge policy, which his opponents had themselves rejected in terms of their own personal dealings with the Corinthians, was because Paul was using his no-charge policy as a "pious" smokescreen so that he might be better able to skim off money for himself from the collection that he was seeking to raise for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

And had these Corinthians that Paul was speaking to bought into this? Yes, they had. And this is why Paul finished **verse 15** with these words, "**If I love you more** [or in other words if I love you more than my opponents love you, as you should be able to clearly see, because my no-charge policy], **am I to be loved less** [or in other words am I to be loved less than my opponents because of my no-charge policy]?"

This is obviously a very sobering commentary, a tragic commentary by Paul, but there was too much at stake for Paul to simply give up. And this brings us to the second component of Paul's final appeal.

The second component of Paul's final appeal was that Paul called those Corinthians who were still rebelling against him to make a final decision about whether his no-charge policy was a ploy to rob them or a means to sacrificially serve them as would be expected from a true apostle (2 Corinthians 12:16-18).

So now let me read these verses and we will see if this is not so. **“But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. (17) Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? (18) I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?”** So is Paul, in these verses, calling those Corinthians who were still rebelling against him to make a final decision about whether his no-charge policy was a ploy to rob them or a means to serve them? I believe the answer is yes!

So now let us look at these verses more carefully. And we will begin with the very first words of **verse 16**. **“But be that as it may** [or in other words regardless of your perspective of my no charge policy], **I did not burden you myself** [or in other words, ‘You cannot deny that because of my no-charge I did not take any money from you when I ministered among you’].” So Paul at the beginning of this verse has now stated a fact that no Corinthian could dispute.

But even though no Corinthian could dispute what he had just said it didn't mean that Paul's opponents would not try to spin these facts and had spun these facts.

The evidence of this can be found at the end of **verse 16**. And now let me read this portion of the verse for you and see if this is not true. **“Nevertheless** [in spite of the fact that you cannot deny], **crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.**” So, what did Paul mean by these words?

This is a parody or in other words a satirical representation of how his opponents had taken something that all the Corinthians knew to be true of Paul, and that should have communicated loud and clear to them that he was in fact a legitimate apostle, and turned these very facts around to attack Paul, by telling the Corinthians that his no-charge policy was a “pious ploy” to rob

by skimming money from the collection that he was raising for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

So after this statement of fact at the beginning **verse 16** that no Corinthian could deny and after the satirical representation of how his opponents had spun this fact at the end of **verse 16**, what did Paul do next?

Paul asked a rhetorical question in **verse 17** designed to counter any accusation by his opponents that his no-charge policy, though a fact, was a pious ploy to rob them.

So let us now read **verse 17** and see if this is not so. **“Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?”** This is the first of several rhetorical questions that Paul addressed to the Corinthians in order to counter the accusation of his opponents that his no-charge policy was simply a ploy to rob them.

And how did Paul believe that the Corinthians would have to answer this question? Paul believed that the Corinthians, in light of the people that he had sent to them who were so well respected, would have to answer the question he had asked in this way, “Of course you have not taken advantage of us through these men whom you have sent to us for they would never have allowed you to do such a thing.”

So who were these men that Paul had sent and who were so highly respected? Paul identified two of those men at the beginning of **verse 18**. So now let me read the beginning of the verse and see who these two men were. **“I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him.”** So among all those that Paul sent which were many, based on **2 Corinthians 8:16-24**, the two Paul identified here in this verse as being particularly significant, in terms of how the Corinthians viewed them, were **Titus** and **“the brother!”**

And this led Paul to ask his second rhetorical question at the end of **verse 18**. And what was this second rhetorical question? **“Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he?”** And what was the answer that Paul would have expected from them? It would have been this, “Of course Titus did not take advantage of us.” So why did Paul highlight Titus rather than highlighting both men that he had introduced? This is because the church at Corinth was clearly personally attached to Titus in a way that they were not attached to

“the brother” even though the brother was clearly highly esteemed by all the churches of Achaia and Macedonia, based on **2 Corinthians 8:16-24**.

So, what was Paul’s point in having asked them these two particular rhetorical questions?

Paul, having established the fact that he was the one who by his mandate had sent these men to the Corinthians, can now argue from their integrity to his own. And he does this at the end of **2 Corinthians 12:18** by a third rhetorical question. And what was the question? **“Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?”** And what would Paul, based on their experience with him during that 18-month period when he sacrificially served them through his no-charge policy and faithfully preached the gospel to them that resulted in the church being established, have expected them to answer? He would have expected an answer something like, “Of course we know this to be true. You did conduct yourself in the same spirit and walked in the same steps as Titus as well as all the others you have sent to us.” And what would Paul have hoped that this conclusion would have led to? He would have hoped that this conclusion would have led them to decide that he was in fact the legitimate apostle and that the gospel that he preached was the true gospel of Christ. This is what he would have hoped.

Not all decisions are the same! For there is one decision that stands head and shoulders above all other decisions. And what is that decision? It is the decision to embrace the gospel that Christ preached as true and by God’s grace to seek to live our lives in a manner worthy of that gospel. There is no other decision more important than this. For this decision will determine whether or not we are alive to God or dead to God, blessed by God in this life and the life to come or not blessed by God in this life and the life to come.

May God give us the grace to make the critical decisions in our lives that will not only bring us salvation and victorious living but will also magnify and glorify the name of God.