

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 13 May 2007

No. T0469

Speaker: Mr. Ian Mears

The consequences of Ministry - 2 Corinthians 6 and 7

During the first century AD as now, Corinth was an important Greek port. However, it had an unfortunate reputation because of the immorality of its inhabitants. We are told that, in Greek plays, the typical Corinthian man was a drunkard and the typical Corinthian woman was a prostitute. As with everywhere else at that time, except places where Jews were in the majority such as Judea and Galilee, it was dominated by idolatry; the worship of gods and goddesses which did not exist except for the demonic power behind them. Some of the practices connected with the pagan temples were immoral and positively harmful. Even without those practices, idolatry blinded its adherents to the truth about the one true God. In fact, Paul could write in 2 Corinthians 4:4 of those "whose minds the god of this world had blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine upon them." By "the god of this world," he was, of course, referring to Satan.

There had been no Christians in Corinth until Paul arrived and during the eighteen months he spent there, a church was set up, which had grown to quite a size. Many of the converts were Jews but many too were from a Gentile, and therefore pagan, background. Life for them was difficult because so much activity involved idolatry in one way or another, even in business. These converts had dropped the idolatry but they still retained some other aspects of the old life. They admired philosophy, a good public style and appearance, and the use of rhetoric. We might like to ask ourselves how much we have kept on from our lives before we were converted. How much of our attitudes and lifestyle actually come from the world around us with its easy acceptance of immorality, untruthfulness, pride, love of entertainment and materialism?

Paul did not apparently have a very impressive appearance and he deliberately avoided the fancy styles of public speaking the Greeks admired. So he had his detractors at Corinth.

Paul had written earlier to the Corinthian church when he heard that, for all their spiritual gift and enthusiasm, they were dividing into factions, there was disorder when they came together, even drunkenness, some of them had died because of their sins and, worst of all, they had allowed a man who was living with his father's wife to remain in the church without any kind of disciplinary action.

Paul had written to them, telling them off in no uncertain terms. Some of his team, including Timothy, had gone to Corinth, apparently to sort things out but it seems with no effect. This is the background to chapters 6 and 7 and we shall see what the result of Titus' visit there had been.

Chapter 6 of this letter to the church at Corinth opens by finishing chapter 5's theme of the work of God in Christ of reconciliation and our response to it. Paul pleads with his readers "not to receive the grace of God in vain" and reminds them that "Now is the day of salvation." This is advice that not only the unsaved need but believers do as well. Now is the day to experience God's salvation, to make sure that we are right with Him, and to serve Him in ways that we shall not be able to in heaven.

The apostle then goes back to what characterizes the whole epistle – the opening of his heart to the Corinthian church in a way which I do not think we see in any of his other writings. He reveals his motives, his actions, and his experiences. Here we see, too, the proofs of his ministry. In chapter 11, he lists the proofs of his apostleship. In both instances, there is much we may think rather negative. He does not relate how many miracles he has performed, how many converts he has, how many churches he has founded, what his qualifications were, the building programme, the size of the choir or many of the things modern servants of the Lord feel we need to know about them and their work.

Including the rest of the team with him, he says instead that they commend themselves as ministers of God by other things. They had experienced troubles of many kinds - situations needing endurance, there were afflictions, distresses, riots, toiling, floggings, imprisonments, sleeplessness, and hunger, as well as what we might expect of a more spiritual kind - purity, knowledge, longsuffering, kindness, the Holy Spirit, sincere love, the word of truth, God's power, and the armour of righteousness.

He then gives a series contrasting unpleasant experiences with a corresponding opposite. There were bad reports about them but also good reports. They were unknown by the majority of people but also well known by others. They nearly died but actually survived, and they were punished but not killed. There was much to make them sorrowful but,

in fact, they rejoiced. They were financially poor but their message of God's salvation through repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ was making many spiritually rich. Materially, they had nothing but in Christ they possessed all things. Paul was not miserable. His way of life of self-denial, total dedication to the task God had given him of preaching the Gospel and caring for Christians, and complete rejection of sin in any form may have made him seem a killjoy to many but he had an inner God-given joy that none of the difficulties, disappointments and disasters of his life could take from him.

Is this typical of today's Christian ministry? Does the ministry of Christ have the effect upon us that it had upon Paul and his companions? And are we able to open our hearts to others in such a transparent way, showing such complete sincerity and total devotion to Christ and love for His people? Do we have Paul's joy? Do we have his care and concern for other Christians? Do we have his success in the Gospel? Do we have his relationship with the Lord?

Paul makes it clear that he expected a response from the Corinthian church in their affections towards him. How do we respond to other believers? Are we as critical and closed up towards them as the Corinthians had been towards Paul? Coldness of heart is a serious problem in many churches. 1 Corinthians and the later chapters of this one show that some of them found him unimpressive and it is obvious that Paul felt this very keenly. However, he sought to put things right, as we have already seen, not by impressing the Corinthians with his successes but with what another man would probably have seen as weakness and failure and would have preferred to hide.

He then goes on to exhort the Corinthians to be separate from the wrong things of the society around them, and in particular, to avoid idolatry. We have already mentioned the dominance this had over the society of the time. Christians are not to share in evil practices. Paul tells us not to be unequally yoked. The picture is of two different kinds of animals yoked together to pull a cart or a plough. How could they pull together properly when they were of different sizes and temperaments? It would be quite unsuitable, incongruous. How can Christians pull together with people who are so fundamentally different from them in the eyes of God? What can righteousness have in common with lawlessness or light with darkness? What accord can Christ have with Belial (meaning Satan)? And finally, what agreement can there be between God's temple and an idol's temple? Quotations from the Old Testament show what privileges and benefits result from separation from the world's evils.

"I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord God Almighty."

So it is not surprising in the light of these promises that, at the beginning of chapter 7, Paul urges his readers to cleanse themselves from the filthiness of the flesh (not our physical bodies but the old sinful nature which is always opposed to God) and from every defilement of our spirits, and to perfect holiness in the fear of God.

This reminds us that we are engaged upon serious business as Christians. Being holy, that is separated to God and separated from the world around us, is so important that it has to be done in the fear of God. Yes, there is such a thing as the fear of God, even for Christians. It is not just an optional extra if we feel like it. We read in Leviticus 11:44 that God told Israel that they had to be holy because He was holy. Because they belonged to Him they had to be like Him. It is just the same for us today. We read much the same in 1 Peter 1:15 and 16 - "but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, for it is written 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"

We are answerable to God for our conduct during this life, not just for how well we witnessed, how hard we worked in Christian service and whether we loved other Christians sincerely etc, although these really are all very important, but also whether we took separation from a wicked world seriously, separation from the world that crucified our Lord Jesus Christ. We are definitely not called upon to be peculiar, eccentric extremists, always criticising others and always with a bad conscience ourselves because we are never sure that what we're doing isn't worldly. Or even worse, we may be proud that we are getting it right - in our own opinion - and are better than others whom we regard as worldly. However, we probably all need to look to ourselves and see that we are not adopting the world's ways. Paul shows that we have nothing in common with them. We can be far too slack in these things and perhaps that is one of the main characteristics of contemporary Christianity. Do we even think seriously about what in contemporary society and life in general is unclean and therefore unacceptable to God and unfitting for a Christian, and to be avoided?

Paul then pleads again with the Corinthian church and emphasises how much they mean to him. He has not cheated anyone, they are in his heart to live together and to die together and, more surprisingly, he is proud of them. He had been boasting about them. This is quite unexpected, bearing in mind what Paul says about them in his first letter to Corinth. Things were then going badly wrong as we have seen and it seems they may have resisted attempts to put them right.

When Paul and his companions had been in Macedonia, they had had no rest and had been downcast by conflicts outside themselves and fears within. Then Titus returned from his visit to Corinth and his good report of the situation in

the church there changed everything for Paul. Do we take the welfare of other Christians as seriously as Paul did? Are we as emotionally involved as he was? Do we really care? Or do we just offer up a prayer or two and let them get on with it? That was not Paul's way and surely it was not the Lord's way. There was never any occasion in the Lord's life when He could not be bothered with a person or had no interest in their situation.

Paul had originally regretted his strongly-worded letter because it had grieved the Corinthians but the letter had had a good effect in that their sorrow had made them repent. However, their sorrow on receiving and taking in the meaning of Paul's letter was not the ordinary sort of human remorse - a useless regret over mistakes which can never be put right and which the apostle tells us here eventually leads to death - but it was a godly sorrow. This produced repentance leading to salvation - the needed action and a positive improvement with the past put behind them. Their reaction to the tough line Paul had taken with them was to clear themselves of the worst of the errors he had mentioned. We have already said what this was. Paul had criticised them strongly for this dreadful failure and so they had excommunicated the culprit. They had shown exemplary zeal in dealing with the situation and had proved themselves finally to be innocent in the matter.

How do we respond to spiritual failure? Do we just try and shrug it off? Do we let it fester permanently in a remorseful way? Or do we seek the Lord's restoration? It sometimes can require the radical action taken in Corinth and it always requires confession and repentance. Perhaps we are not prepared for that. Perhaps we prefer to sweep sins and failures under the carpet, even though we are well aware that none of these things can be hidden from God's all-seeing eye. In any case, sweeping dirt under the carpet produces unsightly bumps which will not go away whether we ignore them or not.

Paul's reason for writing to the Corinthians as he did may seem surprising. He had not written for the sake of the wrongdoer nor for the one wronged but that the church's care for the apostle might be revealed to them before God. This had completely changed Paul's unhappy state of mind. The news Titus had brought had comforted him. In addition, Titus' spirit had been refreshed by the greatly improved situation in Corinth and this in turn added to Paul's joy. He had boasted to Titus about the Corinthians and presumably had said that they would accept Paul's instructions and put matters right. It certainly seems that Titus had an effect on the church at Corinth which others had not. He had definitely succeeded. The church had been obedient and had received Titus in fear and trembling. Timothy and others had been to Corinth but it seems it was Titus who turned the situation round to the great comfort and rejoicing of Paul. Are we effective? Are we convincing? It should not be that others are changed by our bending them to our will in a domineering or overbearing way, or by being merely good at being persuasive. This is what the world does, at one extreme shouting to get our way or at the other extreme nudging people towards our way of thinking, sometimes by means that are not always honest. These were methods that Paul and his companions deliberately avoided. And so should we.

However, he did not shrink from taking a stand when he had to, as we have seen. He did not take the easy way out and just keep quiet. We tend to be unthinking and too loud or thinking too much and too quiet. So we can cause unnecessary but avoidable upset on the one hand or miss opportunities to say a helpfully correcting word on the other. These opportunities generally do not repeat themselves. Paul had the authority of an apostle, which we do not, and did not hesitate to use it where necessary. But there was always that humility which he had because of his awareness of how terribly he had sinned in his unconverted days and surely because of his close walk with his Master. What's your style and where did you get it from?

So we see in these two chapters the consequences of ministry. Paul's calling as an apostle led to a lifestyle which was far from settled or pleasant, being filled with hardship and stress. But the results of this way of life were the conversion to Christ of many people and the effective nurturing of the churches which he had planted. For the Corinthian Christians the consequences were that they were enabled to see their actions in their true light, to see their mistakes and to take corrective action. This in turn led to comfort, joy and refreshment for themselves and for Paul and his fellow workers.

May we accept the godly ministry of others and may our own ministry or service be effective. May there be more acceptance of the difficulties and hardships which result from true service to the Lord and His people, more experience of what Paul knew - purity, knowledge, longsuffering, kindness, the Holy Spirit, sincere love, the word of truth, God's power, the armour of righteousness and joy. May we respond in the right, the Christ-like way to difficult situations and people - not too fast, not too loud, not too bold, not too slow, not too quiet, and not too fearful. May we be truly holy and separated from this world and its evils. And may we have the same devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ as Paul had.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.