

“TEST YOURSELF”
(2 Corinthians 13:1-13)

This morning we come to the end of our study of 2 Corinthians. We started our study last July, and I’ve told Sharla several times that it is one of the more challenging books I have preached on, but I’ve enjoyed the challenge and we’ve had the privilege to do through some of the most amazing passages in the Bible.

How many of you have taken a DNA test to find out your ethnic roots? Most of us know bits and pieces of where we came from, but genetic testing puts all the pieces together. I took one of these tests a few years ago, and the results were not too surprising – I, like many of you, am mostly of European descent with a whole lot of everything throw in. I have Scottish, Irish, and English, and other blood I can’t even remember, all mixed together. The one big surprise is that I am 13% Jewish. I had no idea.

I was telling my brother about this discovery and he said, “Oh, yeah, grandpa Green – our grandpa on my mom’s side – grandpa Green’s great-grandfather was a Jewish rabbi.” I had never-ever heard that. I don’t know if 13% is enough to make me a part of God’s chosen people, but I can say I’m 1/7 a descendant of Abraham by blood, and 100% his spiritual descendant through Christ.

As the Apostle Paul wraps up his letter to the Corinthian church, he stresses the importance of knowing who you are spiritually, and whether or not you are in the faith. This gets to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. The majority of people in our country claim to be Christians, and yet there is often a disconnect between what people say they are and what they really are. Paul is going to appeal to the Corinthians, and to us as well, to test ourselves to make sure we are living up to our calling in Christ in what we believe, how we live, and how we love. Like a DNA test, a spiritual test reveals who we are in relation to God, and provides an opportunity for us conform to what we claim to be.

By now you know the basic story-line of 2 Corinthians. Paul traveled to the Greek city of Corinth five years earlier on his second missionary journey and preached the gospel in this very pagan city. Some came to know Christ through Paul’s ministry, and he spent 18 months establishing these new believers in the faith, and planting a church to continue God’s work in the city. After he left to evangelize other regions, false teachers came into the church and threatened to undo the work of the gospel Paul began. They bad-mouthed Paul and tried to turn the congregation against him. As their spiritual father Paul wanted to protect his sheep from these wolves, and throughout this letter he has been trying to get the church back on his side – which was the side of the gospel. If they are loyal to Paul, they will be loyal to the gospel message he taught them.

Chapter 13 is laid out in five parts: there is a warning, there is an appeal, there is a prayer, there is a hope, and there is a final greeting. The chapter begins with a warning in verses 1-2a... “This will be my third visit to you. ‘Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others.”

Paul tells the church that he’s preparing to visit them for the third time. His first visit was when he came to the city five years earlier and started the church, and his second visit was a brief visit he made a few years later after he left when he heard that there was dissension in the church. He came back to try and fix things, but the visit did not go well. He was rudely opposed by some in the church, and those who were on Paul’s side did not stick up for him. He decided to leave and let things cool down.

Shortly thereafter he wrote 2 Corinthians where he defended himself and called the Corinthians to return to the things he taught them, and not fall prey to the false teaching of these intruders. “Now,” he says, “I’m coming back for a third visit, and when I come, I’m going to deal directly with the sin and dissension in the church, so consider this your warning.” Like a parent, Paul cares deeply about his spiritual children, and though has treated them gently and lovingly, he’s not going to sit passively by when his children are in danger. For the good of the church Paul is going to take action and directly confront the issues.

In verse one he begins by quoting Deuteronomy 9:15... “Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” The idea behind this Old Testament law is that someone should not be accused of something without adequate proof, but when the proof is established by multiple witnesses, action must be taken against wrongdoers. Paul says, “I’ve not been quick or hasty to judge you, but the evidence has piled up. I warned you on my second visit, and things have not changed, and now I’m giving you another warning before my third visit.”

He says in verse 2, “On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others.” As we saw in chapter 12, some of the Corinthians who professed faith in Christ were still acting immaturely and living like the world around them. Relationally, they were not showing love to each other, they were causing discord and division, and they using slander and gossip to tear others down. Morally, they were continuing in sexual sin and not honoring God with their bodies. Theologically, some in the church were buying into the teachings of the false apostles who taught a different Jesus and a different gospel, and being disloyal to Paul who first brought them the gospel. There was a lot of confrontation that needed to take place in Corinth.

I was looking at a church webpage recently that advertised itself as a church that did not judge people, and were accepting and affirming of all people and all lifestyles. It sounds very appealing, and every church should be welcoming to every person who bears the image of God, as well as accepting people as they are. But God’s goal for the church – for His bride – is that we not stay the way we are – He wants to take us as we are and transform us to look like Christ – he wants to transform our minds, which have been saturated by the philosophies of the world, and renew them to think according to God’s Word.

Parents who truly love their children want them to grow to be fully-functioning adults, and sometimes that means confronting things their life that are detrimental to their growth. Paul is coming not to affirm their sin, but to call them to repent of their sin and be who God made them to be.

Paul goes on to say in 2b-4... “On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him in our dealing with you.”

These verses are a little hard to follow, but Paul’s opponents had convinced the Corinthians that he was a weak and timid leader – if he was a real apostle through whom Christ was speaking, he would come to town, take charge, and subdue people to his will. Greek culture was all about power and control. But on his first and second visits Paul was gentle and meek – he was a humble servant, not a dictatorial tyrant.

“But,” Paul says, “Whatever you think of me, don’t misunderstand that Christ – whom I represent – is not weak, but powerful and will not let your sins go unchecked. But while He possessed all power, He came to earth in weakness – He lived and ministered in a spirit of meekness and gentleness – and He was crucified in weakness.”

It wasn't because He didn't have the power to overcome the cross – at any moment He could have called down a legion of angels to take out His enemies. But He became weak so that we could be strong – because He submitted Himself to the cross, we can be saved and forgiven. Jesus did not stay weak, but triumphantly rose from the dead three days later and ascended back to heaven where He sits at the right hand of the father in glory, and will return to earth as judge.

Paul's point is that he's following the example of Jesus. "Yes, I'm weak," he says, "just as Jesus was weak – but don't mistake weakness for lack of power – when I come God's power will be displayed through my weakness – a power that will deal decisively with sin in the congregation."

After giving a warning, Paul moves on in verse 5 to give an appeal... "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?" The Corinthians had been examining Paul – scrutinizing every detail of his life – and now he says, "Examine yourselves – you've examined me to see if I'm a real apostle – now examine yourselves to see if you're a real Christian."

Paul sees things in the church that were inconsistent with what he taught them. "Take a hard look at yourself," he says. "Are you a Christian – are you in the faith – is Christ in you?" Paul is not trying to get them to doubt their salvation so much as he wants them to confirm it and start living up to their calling in Christ.

How many of you have ever doubted your salvation? I think every believer goes through a time of doubt, especially when we're young. I certainly did – I asked Jesus into my heart ever day for a month just to make sure. What I have observed over time is that those who live in fear that they've lost their salvation most often are the ones who need worry about it the least. Truly unsaved people could care less about their sin or salvation – they are spiritually dead and sin doesn't bother them. But those who are genuinely saved feel convicted and distressed over their sin, which shows that the Spirit of God is within them.

But, if there are many who are saved but think they aren't, there's an even greater number who aren't saved but think they are. D. A. Carson, one of the most respected theologians in America, said, "There are millions of professing believers in North America today (to say nothing of elsewhere) who at some point entered into a shallow commitment to Christianity, but who, if pushed, would be forced to admit they do not love holiness, do not pray, do not hate sin, do not walk humbly with God."

Jesus Himself said that many will say on judgment day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you'" (Matthew 7:22-23a). It's sobering to realize that someone can look and sound like a Christian, but not actually be one. Later in Matthew Jesus taught about the wheat and the tares, illustrating how hard it is to detect who is in the faith and who is not. Just because someone prays to receive Christ, is baptized, and comes to church doesn't necessarily mean that they're truly saved. They may think they are, but when they honestly examine their life, they may see that they're really not.

Paul doesn't say exactly what we are to examine, but when we look at the whole of the New Testament, there are three basic questions that determine the genuineness of our faith. Question #1 is theological: **What do I believe?**

- Do I believe, as Romans 3:23 and 6:23 say, that I am a sinner fallen short of God’s glory and that the wages of my sin is death? Do I believe that I am a basically good person who needs a little improvement, or do I believe that I am eternally lost without God’s grace demonstrated on the cross of Christ?
- Do I believe, as John 14:6 says, that Jesus is the only way to God – and as Romans 10:9 says... “If I declare with my mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in my heart that God raised Him from the dead, I will be saved?”
- Do I believe that the Word of God is my final authority in all that I believe, say, and do? Are my beliefs governed by the Bible or by my personal likes and dislikes? Do I elevate my opinions above God’s?

Once we believe and put our trust in Christ, the sincerity of our faith is tested by a second question of morality: How is my life different since becoming a Christian? 1 John 3:9 says, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.” To be a Christian you must be born again – everyone has a physical birth, but to be saved you must undergo a spiritual rebirth where the Spirit of the Living God indwells you and makes you a new creation. True converts will display the characteristics of a genuine Christian – just as a fruit tree bears fruit.

We will not continue in a life of sin. This doesn’t mean that we will never sin – we will – but we will over time see a decreasing pattern of sin in our lives. The big difference is that when we sin, we will feel convicted – we know that it’s wrong, and rather than give into temptation, we will fight it – and when we do sin, we will confess it and be made right with God.

The third question to test the sincerity of our faith is relational: Do I love people? John 13:35 says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Love is the first fruit of the Spirit, and is the greatest evidence of the Spirit’s presence in your life. We often consider the most spiritual people to be the ones who know their Bibles very well, who actively serve the Lord, and are morally upright – all of which are great qualities. But 1 Corinthians 13 says you can have all knowledge, you can give to the poor, you can serve God to the point of exhaustion – but if you don’t have love, it means nothing.

Some in the Corinthian church, who prided themselves in their spirituality, we’re still acting like spiritual adolescents in the way they treated people. In chapter 12 Paul said he was afraid when he came, he would find discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. God is love, and if we are His children, we will love – we will look not to our own interests, but the interests of others – we will serve, rather than be served – and we will abound in good deeds and acts of kindness to others.

So, Paul says, examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. Someone put it this way: If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That’s why it’s good to examine ourselves and readjust areas of our life that are inconsistent with following Christ.

Paul goes on to say in verse 6... “And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.” If the Corinthians passed their own self-examination, then by implication, Paul would also have passed the test. Since their lives had been changed by the gospel Paul preached to them, it’s proof that Paul is a real apostle. He says, “You pass my test, and I pass your test. Everybody wins.”

After a warning and an appeal, Paul offers a prayer for the Corinthians in verses 7-9... “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. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is that you may be fully restored.”

Even though Paul has issued a strong warning, his shepherd’s heart comes out in his prayer...

- We first see the *object* of his prayer – he prays that they will not continue in sin, but repent and be restored. God loves to restore what has been broken, and Paul’s desire is that this broken church will be made whole.
- Then we see the *motive* of his prayer – he’s not praying they will change their ways to restore his reputation, but to restore their relationship. The irony is that his reputation for being weak could once again suffer if they repented. “If you do the right thing,” he says, “I won’t have to come with a big stick and discipline you – and if my lack of harshness once again makes me appear weak, that’s fine by me. I don’t care how I am perceived – I only care about your spiritual wellbeing.”
- He says the same thing in a different way in verse 8... “We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” In other words, if you guys pass the test and I find you living in the truth, I won’t have to do anything because the truth will have done it’s work.
- In verse 9 Paul states the *aim* of his prayer – his constant, burning prayer is for his spiritual children would be fully restored from immaturity to maturity – that they would believe the true gospel and hold fast to the Word – that they would act like Christians in the way they lived and the way they loved. As their spiritual father, he wants his children to thrive and be strong, mature, and robust in their faith. As long as they are strong, he doesn’t care if he comes off as looking weak.

In verse 10 Paul expresses his hope that changes will be made before he arrives... “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.” The reason Paul is bold and direct in his letter is so that he won’t have to be bold and direct when he comes. He will do what he needs to do as their spiritual authority, but he hopes they will change their ways before he comes – so that his visit will be pleasant and uplifting, not confrontive.

Paul concludes his letter with some final exhortations, a greeting, and a blessing. Verses 10-13... “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. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All God’s people here send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The theme of Paul’s final comments is unity with each other and with the Lord. The church he started was divided and disjointed, and the only way it would survive is to dwell together in unity. He highlights six things that foster unity...

- Rejoice! The church was going through some very hard times, and Paul knew through experience how important it was to maintain a deep-seated joy, and joy could return to the church when there was repentance.
- Strive for full restoration. The Greek word for restoration means to “mend your ways.” It’s a word that was used in the gospels to repair fishing nets that had been torn. The church had been torn apart by division and disagreements, and Paul calls them to mend and heal those relationships and be made whole.
- Encourage one another. Encourage means to come alongside someone who is hurting and comfort them – to fill them with courage to face their trials and overcome them. Encouragement had probably been lacking in the church for some time.
- Be of one mind. Churches are joyful and unified when they are like-minded. This, of course, does not mean that we all think the same way about everything, but that we agree on the central truths of God’s Word that have unified the church for the last 2000 years – the authority of the Bible, the deity of Christ, and salvation through Christ alone by faith alone. We can agree to disagree on the small stuff, but not on the core beliefs and values of the faith.
- Live in peace. Paul longed to live in peace with the Corinthians – not a false peace that pretends there are no problems, but a true peace that works through problems and resolves them.
- In verse 13 he says, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” What does that mean? You probably don’t want to be kissed when you walk into church, but in first century culture kissing was a common way of greeting people you were close to and you liked. You didn’t kiss enemies or people who didn’t like – you kissed people who were like family to you, and church was family. The problem in Corinth is that they weren’t acting like family – they were divided and tension filled the air. They needed to get their differences resolved and forgiven and start kissing each other. In our culture, greeting each other with a physical display of affection like a handshake or hug is a way of saying, “We’re family. Despite our differences, we are one in the Lord.”

All six of these admonitions call the church to unity, and Paul ends his letter by giving a model from the triune God on how to be unified. Verse 14... “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Paul desires that the church be filled with the grace of Christ that replaces self-centeredness – the love of God that stamps out jealousy and division, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that creates a bond of peace between believers. Being united vertically with the Father, Son, and Spirit, we will naturally be united horizontally with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

That’s a wrap on 2 Corinthians. One question remains – how did Paul’s third visit go? Did things turn around? We don’t know for sure, but there are some small clues that the Corinthians responded positively to Paul’s letter and restoration took place. We know from Acts 20 that Paul stayed in Corinth for three months, and while he was there, he wrote the book of Romans, which does not mention any problems. We also know that Paul said in chapter 10 that he would not move on to evangelize other areas if the Corinthian church still needed his attention, and Romans says he was planning on moving on to Spain – so he must have felt confident to move on. Finally, Paul says in Romans that the believers in Corinth completed their offering to give to the poor in Jerusalem – another sign that things had turned around.

But a more important question is – what is our response to Paul’s letter – especially this final chapter?

- As you examine your life, what does it reveal about your spiritual DNA? Are you in the faith? Is Christ in you?
- If He is in you, are you living up to His calling in what you believe, how you live your life, and how you love others?
- Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal who you really are, what you really believe, and how you really live. If He reveals things that need to be changed, repent and be restored. I’m rooting for you and for me to pass the test and live confidently in the grace and power of the Lord.