

In 2000, Harvard professor Robert Putnam released his now-classic book, *Bowling Alone*. The book details the collapse of the American community and how we have become increasingly disconnected from it. Since the 1970s, we have seen a sharp decrease of participation across every aspect of civic life. As communal ties and participation decrease, division and tribalism increase. Putnam wrote,

**For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed, and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.**

We live in a culture that increasingly lacks forgiveness, healthy confrontation, restoration, and patience. These basic tenets of relationships are necessary for a healthy community to thrive. Our ability to maintain and cultivate healthy relationships is suffering. Is it any wonder that over the past year we have seen increased numbers of isolation, loneliness, and depression?

We are living through a culture-wide failure of community and relationships. And in response, over and over, we are turning to hostility. In a world that values production and performance over character and authenticity, we have reduced relationships to commodities to be used rather than community to be cultivated. Instead of reconciliation, we choose to isolation. When division hits, we retreat into our ideological enclaves.

Any explanation for this phenomenon is complex, multi-faceted, and certainly beyond the focus of our time together; however, the problem of division within a community is anything but new. So what can be done to resist division and start to heal brokenness within our communities? How does the church act differently in healing broken relationships?

In 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, this is precisely what Paul demonstrates to us through his work to mend the division between himself and the Corinthian Church. I want to approach the text by observing Paul's example and see what we can learn about how followers of Jesus should operate in the midst of division.

The context for this passage is that false apostles/teachers had arrived at the Corinthians church - who Paul sarcastically calls the "Super-Apostles"—and have been leading the church away from the gospel and at the same time sowing seeds of division by making accusations against Paul's authority and ministry over the church. The false apostles were

preaching a counter gospel and charging the Corinthians money for their message. Paul rebukes them and calls them out for this practice, and in turn, they begin to go on the attack against Paul. Unfortunately, some in the Corinthians church do not come to Paul's defense but start to question his authority, and Paul is faced with division and discord against him!

For most of the letter, Paul has used a softer approach with the congregation, but he holds nothing back as he comes to a close of his letter. He is very blunt with his concern for the church and his disappointment with how they had been taken so easily by the seductions of these false leaders.

As Paul turns the corner toward the close of his letter to this congregation, you see in the text for this message something akin to a parent lovingly scolding their child about their misdoings. It is a stern but loving attempt to mend the broken relationship without avoiding the fracture that has taken place.

The text is broken into three different sections, and in each section, we will see a different practice Paul uses to heal the division that has taken place.

### **Patient Perseverance 2 Corinthians 12:11-13**

*"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" (v. 11).* Paul is offering some concluding remarks on the discussion he began in chapter 11. At this point, Paul has been forced, by the Corinthians, to defend himself in a manner that he is entirely uncomfortable with doing, saying, "I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it." Because the Corinthians demanded he prove his authority and their following of the false-apostles, Paul is forced to boast in his accomplishments, which is something he is uncomfortable doing.

But in Greco-Roman rhetoric, something that Paul was well versed in, boasting was justified if it was forced on the public speaker. So in this instance, Paul's boasting, while customarily considered uncouth, is a justified action in Paul's defense of his ministry because he was driven by the Corinthians and their questioning of Paul's status as a genuine apostle.

But notice that even in his boasting, he takes a different posture than those so-called "super-apostles." Here, hidden in verse 11, is the paradox of a genuine servant of Christ. On one hand, Paul says that he is not in the least bit inferior to anyone! "I am not inferior." This should have fostered admiration and gratitude to Paul from the church, but instead, it led to their questioning.

But then, on the other hand, Paul says, "I am nothing." Right there is the paradox of a servant of God, and should always be at the heart of the follower of Jesus. It is this "power in weakness" that sets the true apostle apart from the false leaders. This power in weakness is a hallmark of Paul's ministry. Earlier in chapter 12, Paul was making this point that it is through our weakness that Christ is strong.

Therefore, the true servant of Christ holds the unique posture to say that each of these are equally true, that they are equal to anyone, but at the same time, they are nothing. The paradox runs through the heart of the Christian faith. For we do not rely on our abilities but Christ working within us. If God is calling us to something, he will equip us to accomplish it.

In verses 12 and 13, Paul defends his claim that he is in no way inferior to the Apostles on their terms. *"I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles" (v. 12).*

Although he has continually responded to these accusations in other writings and trips, Paul once again "persevered" in demonstrating the mark of a true apostle. The continual need to defend himself must have been exhausting for Paul. He found himself perpetually disappointed in the Corinthians, for they continued to be swayed away and did not stand up for him. But Paul persists in patience.

I'm reminded of Paul's words earlier in his first letter to the church, "Love is patient." His patience is fueled by his love for the church. Certainly, we can all understand the important role of patience in relationships. Whether it is the parent who has answered the 1000th question of the day, or the roommate who continually leaves the kitchen messy, or the loved one who takes advantage of you over and over. Impatience can fuel division, but patience creates space to deal with conflict.

Paul continues: *"How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!" (v. 13).* You can almost hear the exasperation in his voice, distressed that the Church continues to complain, making accusations that they were inferior. Ultimately, Paul is claiming that he is every bit as qualified to lead the church, and even more so, than the "super-apostles" against their own claims. The only area that Paul does not compare to the super-apostles is in that he wasn't a burden to them!

The reference to being a burden is a financial term. Paul took intentional care not to be reliant on this church for his financial well-being. He refused to accept any financial support from them. The reason for this was Paul did not want to give room for them to claim that he was only preaching for the purpose of taking advantage of them. So he sarcastically jokes with them, "Forgive me this wrong."

Do you notice the patience in Paul here? This is the 3rd or 4th letter Paul has written to this church. Against their accusations he has been patient and understanding, yet at the same time confronting the church in their misunderstanding. Paul chooses patient perseverance as the path toward resisting division in the middle of a challenging situation that could have easily escalated to deeper division. And so can we.

Given the intensity of this past year, we can all see the need for patient perseverance. Love is patient. It is patient with one another; it is patient with our neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family. Maybe for you, this means you need to bite your tongue. Maybe it means you need to have a challenging conversation. Patient perseverance creates the space for clarification and unity to grow. For all of us, patient perseverance means assuming the best of the other. What does this look like for you now? Who do you need to express greater patience with to resist division?

## **2 Corinthians 12:14-18 - Selfless Sacrifice**

**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. 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. If I love you more, will you love me less? vv.14-15**

The importance of selfless sacrifice is on full display in these verses, despite the continual accusation against him. To make his case, he draws on a metaphor of the parent-child relationship. Paul is likening himself to the parent and the church he planted as his children. In the same manner that parents selflessly pour out their life for their children, so too Paul has done this for the Corinthians. And this is Paul's desire, not to take the possessions from them, but to give of himself so that he can reach them.

And the metaphor is simple, "Children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." All of us, at some level, can grasp this metaphor. It would seem foolish for a young child to be forced to put away money for their parents; it is backwards. It is the role of the parent to support and take care of their children. This concept of selfless sacrifice is part and parcel to parenting.

There is a reason Paul uses the metaphor of a parent-child relationship. Because what can fester into family division is defused by selfless sacrifice. It is a thankless job that goes unnoticed. The art of parenting can and will form you into the kind of person that resists division. This is the attitude of the Apostle Paul and should be the attitude of the follower of Jesus. Not taking offense too easily, but selflessly sacrificing for the sake of others.

Paul is likening himself to being the parent of this church and wants to ensure that his heart is to care and provide for them at whatever the expense. Paul's commitment to the church is to the relationship with the church, not financial reward. His ultimate desire for the Corinthians is only what is good for them spiritually, not for their goods. The heart of a servant is selfless. *"So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?" (v. 15).*

Notice that Paul is not begrudgingly expending himself but does so gladly, in the same way that a parent delights in providing and caring for their child. In reflecting the same love that Christ has for the world, so too, we are to give ourselves to the world around us. Paul here gives himself without restraint. He doesn't ask for anything back in response

but gives the whole of who he is for the Corinthian Church. What a direct contrast to the false Apostles! They had given themselves only in exchange for payment, deceiving them out of their money.

Through and through, Paul's heart is selfless. But it is clear his selflessness is not reciprocated. "If I love you more, will you love me less?" One would expect that the increase of love from Paul to the church would result in a response of love from the Corinthians, but it does not. The more he gives himself in selfless love, they love him less, and the less they commit themselves to him in honor and gratitude. The Corinthians have failed to respond to Paul's love with love, but nonetheless, Paul persists in selfless sacrifice for the church.

*"Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery!" (v. 16).* The Corinthians couldn't find fault with anything he did, so they claimed he was falsely acting in that manner to win them over only to later, once their trust was in Paul, take advantage of them. This verse is dripping with sarcasm, poking at the foolishness of their accusations. A more literal translation of the word used here is "bamboozled." Essentially, Paul is saying, "Tell me one time that I took advantage of you?" Paul goes on to give examples of his exemplary approach.

*"Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?" (vv. 17-18).* Paul puts his selfless love on full display for the Corinthians. He challenges them to name one time that he had taken advantage of them. He had never sought to take advantage, never asking for something in return for his labor of love for this church.

Once again, we see Paul resisting division. His selfless sacrifice in the midst of a broken relationship enables Paul to persist in love of the church. As a parent gives selflessly for their children, so to Paul sacrifices. And we too are to live selflessly for others, defusing division by selflessly loving others.

## **2 Corinthians 12:19-21 – Seek Restoration**

*"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" (v. 19).* How is Paul able to persist in love, remaining steady in his concern and confrontation? Paul reminds the Corinthians that he is not defending his own reputation to them; rather, he is seeking to remain faithful in the sight of God.

Paul is not answerable to the congregation but is answerable to God. While this is not license to do whatever he pleases, in the name of answering to God only, he is ultimately responsible only to God. This enables him to do what is necessary to confront and challenge the congregation, regardless of their response.

He also ensures that the Corinthians do not mistake his efforts as only trying to defend his reputation. This is not the case. His goal in his exchange with the Corinthians is not to "win" but to restore. His ability to focus on the restoration of the relationship is because he is speaking "in the sight of God as those in Christ."

How many times have you said something you regret in the middle of an argument because your sole focus was to win? For Paul, he keeps his perspective, remembering that ultimately he is responsible to God for the manner in which he carries himself. It would be wise for us to heed Paul's example. It is too easy for our relational interactions to devolve into arguments to be won. But with the proper perspective of standing "in the sight of God," Paul is not after winning the argument but restoration.

All of this comes from a posture of love, "...everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening." Everything Paul has been doing, everything Paul has been saying is for the edification of the church. The phrase "dear friends" is a phrase that Paul often uses when he is addressing his churches. It signals warmth and care, reminding the Corinthians of their intimate connection with Paul.

Paul's emphasis of his love and focus on edifying the church is intentional because the exercising of his authority bent toward restoration can often and will often come across less as building up and more as tearing down. Relationships require healthy confrontation. Resisting division does not mean passivity. And often, this requires confrontation that can feel like tearing down the broken areas of failure. But to avoid restoration, to avoid making things right is not a healthy relationship. Paul sees the failures of this church that he loves and seeks to restore the relationship with them and restore them from their failures.

Paul is willing to seek the restoration of the community he loves because he knows that in the same manner that he is responsible before God for his leadership, the Corinthians will also be responsible before God, so love would demand that he confronts them on their sin, and the areas where they have failed. Genuine community that resists division requires the ability to honestly and graciously speak the truth. Read how he confronts them.

**For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder. v. 20**

On Paul's previous visit to the church, he had warned of the need for those in the church to repent. But the reports he had received about their progress were not positive. He feared that he would have to confront them again because they did not make the progress Paul hoped for.

Paul lists both communal sins as well as individual sins. The first list describes the failures of the community to operate out of love: discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder.

This list of communal sins, I believe, is a challenge for so many in the church today, and we would be foolish to think these couldn't take root within our own community. This list of qualities describes the dysfunction of relationships and also describes the general tone of our increasingly divided world experiences. But the church is to operate differently. Paul fears that the Corinthians have failed to love one another well and

taken seriously the demands of a Christian community to operate from love.

I can't help but think of Jesus' words to his disciples in John.

**A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35**

It is the radical love of the Christian community that sets us apart from the world and is one of our greatest witnesses. Where else can you find a community that is diverse in every respect; socio-economically, generationally, politically, racially, and still bound by love? This is the church...a radically diverse community bound by a love that refuses to give up on one another but seeks restoration. It resists division committing itself to one another despite the struggles and challenges it may face.

And Paul is calling the Corinthians, and he is calling us to stand above the fray and be a community marked more by love for one another than by division. He goes on in verse 21 to express his concern about some of the unrepentant sins that ran rampant on his earlier visits.

**I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery in which they have indulged. v. 21**

Paul had previously confronted the church of the rampant sin that had infiltrated the church. Particularly the concern Paul had was "impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery." This was most likely connected with the worship rites at idol temples within Corinth, making them all the more heinous.

Much like our own context, Corinth was a morally lax city that provided ample opportunity to engage in the "sins of the flesh," as Paul would call them in other places. In the same manner that the church was to stand in contrast to a culture of division, so too the church here is called to stand in contrast to our culture as a culture of holiness.

Paul's concern for the community, centered on their failure to live into this calling. His tone is that of a disappointed parent struggling with guilt over their child's failure to mature and behave appropriately.

We can't lapse into the thinking that resisting division means we don't deal with failures. We can't just sweep our disagreements and our failures under the rug and hope that they never return. This is why Paul addresses the failures of the Corinthian church head on. His heart was for their restoration.

If you are anything like me, it always feels easier just to let failures and disagreements go rather than deal with them. But I've learned enough to realize this never solves the problem but only allows space for division to form in the manner of resentment and frustration. This may

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

mean a difficult conversation with a friend, or you confront your spouse on inconsistencies you've seen, or your community group needs to prayerfully have a difficult conversation. Resisting division requires that we seek to restore those who have gone wayward and seek to restore them back to life in Christ.

But remember that Paul does so entirely from the posture of love. And this posture flows out of the other two; it begins with patient perseverance, then moves to selfless sacrifice, and out of those two, we can seek restoration. Because, for the follower of Jesus, we are called to resist division and cultivate community.

I spoke at the beginning of this message about the fraying of our social fabric. What Paul does with the Corinthians church is a remarkable counterexample for the world around us. I really believe this is one of the areas that the church has the potential to demonstrate an alternative way in the world. In a world that is utterly marked by division, slander, toxic social media exchange, and fits of hate, the church stands as a counter relational culture.

I actually believe that the sharper divisions and canceling culture we are seeing is actually the world seeking a form of atonement. With nowhere to turn, they turn toward ideological purity that eliminates anything that doesn't line up.

When a culture has eliminated any form of forgiveness and atonement, we are left only with the ability to deconstruct. And hear me out here; there are absolutely things in our culture that need to be deconstructed. But the message of the gospel is always following deconstruction with reconstruction. It is bent toward accountability, responsibility, justice, forgiveness, and restoration. Not seeking to win, but to restore and edify one another. Not seeking to cut down, but to build up. Selflessly sacrificing for the greater good and seeking restoration for the other.

What would it look like for the church to stand separate, exhibiting a counter-relational culture? The opportunity for the church to stand distinct is there, to live by a different ethic. Because the church chooses to deal with division differently than the world. Because we have a different story to tell, one of redemption that has atonement at its heart.

Let me close with Paul's familiar words that he wrote to the Corinthians in his first letter. As you read them, I want you to consider what they could mean to how you can resist division.

**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a**

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