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2 Corinthians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

February 18, 2022



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Transcript

Paul introduces the second epistle to the Corinthians in a manner typical of his letters. He identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. The letter is also from Timothy, who from verses such as verse 19 of this chapter is clearly not Paul's co-author, but more likely a fellow minister of Paul known to the Corinthian church.

It is addressed to the Corinthian church in particular, but also to the wider body of Christians in the region. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It also seems to have been the most significant church within that region.

Paul had received much less of a response in Athens in Acts chapter 17 than he later did in Corinth in Acts chapter 18. Paul gives them his customary greeting and then moves into an expression of thanksgiving. This opening formula is common to many of Paul's letters.

Paul's thanksgiving begins by focusing upon the theme of God's comfort. God is the God who communicates comfort and communicates comfort in order that we might be able to share it with others in turn. God's gifts conscript their recipients into the task of giving in turn.

When God gives to us, he gives us the capacity to give to others. For the sharing of comfort, there is a prior sharing in affliction. The people of God share in the afflictions of Christ himself.

Paul particularly has in view here what we suffer for the sake of Christ's name. Just as Christ was at odds with the world and its powers, so faithful Christians will be. The sufferings of the Messiah were the birth pangs through which the new age would dawn.

And in the story of the Gospels, the period running up to Christ's death is a time of testing and tribulation, followed by the great sufferings undergone by Christ in the crucifixion. This same pattern is one that plays itself out in the life of his people. However, while they participate in the sufferings and the tribulations of the Messiah by which the new age will dawn, they also participate in the comfort of the victory that Christ has already accomplished.

Like Christ's sufferings for his people, the Apostles' suffering has a vicarious character to it. They are suffering for the salvation and the comfort of the people to whom they have been sent. However, the Corinthians in their turn will share in the sufferings of the Apostles, as the Apostles share in the sufferings of the Messiah, so that they too might enjoy comfort with them.

This vision of sharing in the sufferings of the Messiah and finding true comfort in the very place that might seem least promising is one that contrasts with the sort of super-spirituality that had been popular among the Corinthians. The close entanglement of comfort and affliction that Paul describes here also fits with his attention to the paradoxical character of life in Christ, where poverty and wealth, weakness and power, folly and wisdom are also radically reshaped by the way that Christ undermines the structures and the values of the world. Paul then proceeds to describe a particular trial that he and his fellow missionaries had undergone while in Asia.

They had, at this time, despaired of life itself and been tested beyond their very limits, feeling that they were as good as condemned to death. However, through it they had depended upon God rather than upon their own strength, and as a result had discovered God's power in their situation, the very power by which He raises the dead. This deliverance had left them with greater confidence of future deliverance.

It was precisely in being brought to the utter end of their own resources that they discovered the sufficiency of God's strength in their situation. This is a theme to which Paul will return later in the epistle, in chapter 12 verses 9-10 for instance. But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul charges the Corinthians to help them in prayer, interceding for them in their trials and joining with them in thanks for their deliverance. Paul began this section by blessing and praising God for his comforting of them in their afflictions, and now he concludes it by calling the Corinthians to a companionship of intercession and thanksgiving in his ministry, so that God's goodness to them, Paul and his fellow missionaries, will lead to an outpouring of gratitude from many, glorifying God. The sufferings of Paul and his companions are an opportunity for other Christians to join them in knowing and giving thanks for the blessing of answered intercession when the Lord brings deliverance.

Paul speaks of his boast in his gospel ministry. This is not a boast that rests upon his own strength, superiority or self-sufficiency, but in the call and the empowerment of God that equips him and enables him to fulfil his commission. Paul can make a very bold claim about his integrity here.

He has acted in consistency, purity and sincerity. This wasn't by some earthly wisdom of Paul's own, but by the grace of God that was at work through him. Paul has written to the Corinthians with frankness and with clarity, not hiding anything from them or dissembling his motives.

His hope is that they will come fully to understand, not just in the more immediate

future, but on the final day, when Paul's desire is that the missionaries' boast in the Corinthians will be reciprocated and answered by the Corinthians' boast in them, as both praise God for each other. Paul's expression of his confidence before God in the integrity of his ministry and the dependability of his word needs to be understood in the light of what comes next. Paul has seemingly opened himself up to an accusation that this is not the case.

He has expressed his desire previously to visit the Corinthians, but as things transpired he didn't visit them, but sent them a painful letter of rebuke instead. The original plan had involved two visits to Corinth, one on the way to Macedonia and another on the return journey, with the Corinthians sending him on his way to Judea. However, Paul hadn't done this.

Since writing 1 Corinthians, Paul had sent Timothy, his close fellow worker, to the Corinthians. Presumably, Paul had been informed by Timothy that the situation in Corinth had badly deteriorated and that it required his personal presence and attention. Paul had then paid a visit to the Corinthians, to which he refers in 2 1. This was a painful visit, and after this he had written another letter to them, a letter that was also described as painful.

He had done this instead of visiting them in person, as he had originally intended. And this had all left Paul open to the accusation that he was unreliable, not a man of his word, inconsistent, someone who ran hot and cold. This accusation for Paul is an incredibly serious one, and he is very concerned to answer it.

A challenge to the reliability of his word and testimony cuts to the heart of his apostolic witness. Paul does not try to firewall the question of his integrity in communicating his travel plans from the gospel testimony that he bears, as if the latter really matters but the former can be brushed off as a realm where white lies and unreliability and wishy-washiness are legitimate, or at least matters of little consequence. Paul's message of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness is fundamental, and it is incredibly important that his behaviour comports with this.

And Paul makes clear that he has been faithful in this respect. God doesn't speak with inclarity or inconsistency in Christ. Rather, God's word in Christ is a resounding yes to all of his promises, to which the bold Amen of the Church must answer.

It is this faithful and trustworthy God that established the Corinthians with Paul in Christ. He has anointed them for their ministry, he has placed a seal upon them – perhaps Paul has baptism in mind here – and has given them the guarantee of the Spirit, a down payment assuring them of the coming fullness of their redemption. Paul calls God as his witness to his integrity.

Paul's decision not to visit Corinth, as he had originally intended, was not vacillation on

Paul's part. It wasn't Paul running hot and cold in his relationship with the Corinthians. Rather, Paul decided against a visit precisely on account of his care and love for the Corinthians.

Had he gone, his visit would have been difficult and painful for them. Paul was, as it were, the Corinthians' father in the Gospel. He had sown the seed of the word by which they had first come to faith.

However, as a good father, his desire was to avoid being overbearing and authoritarian with them. He did not want to lord it over the Corinthians' faith, as if he was the master of it. Rather, his desire is to play the part of a faithful father, whose wish is the joy and well-being of his children, and whose rebukes are kept as gentle as they can possibly be, without losing their effect.

He wants to have the joy of seeing his children grow, and that requires not dominating over them. A painful letter was a softer and gentler correction than a painful visit. So, out of love for the Corinthians, Paul spared them a harsher and potentially more authoritarian approach.

Paul does not want to boss the Corinthians around and lord it over them, but to assist them in their growth. What he hopes for from the Corinthians is a sharing of joy. However, had he visited in a way that brought them pain, he would be looking for gladness from the very people to whom he had brought grief.

The appropriate relationship between the Corinthians and Paul was one of rich reciprocity. They should be comforted in Paul's comfort. Paul and the Corinthians should be praying for and giving thanks for God's deliverances of each other.

They should be boasting in each other. Paul wrote to them out of a deep pain, yet communicating his love, precisely because this longed-for reciprocity and mutuality was broken. And he really did not want to visit them in a situation where this lack of mutual joy would be painfully and clearly absent, unless it were absolutely necessary.

We don't know exactly what happened in Corinth, but we can get some hints of it. Chapter 7, verse 12 might give us some vague sense. Chapter 7, verse 11 suggests that the Corinthian congregation had proven themselves innocent of the wrong themselves.

The wrongdoer had been subjected to church discipline, which now seems to have been proven successful. He too was now grieving for the wrong that he had done, and now the church has encouraged to restore him to fellowship. Exclusion from church fellowship and excommunication, which is likely what was involved here, is a very serious sanction.

But the desired end is repentance and restoration, which Paul calls for here. Paul's desire was not punitive, but restorative. It seems most likely that Paul himself was the directly wronged party, the offence causing great pain between Paul and the Corinthians,

perhaps leading some of the Corinthians to question whether, as a result of being hurt, Paul must have abandoned his love for them when he didn't visit them again.

Paul, however, speaks of the matter delicately. He doesn't want to open up the wound. He now charges the Corinthians to forgive and restore the offender.

He forgives those that they forgive. He does not want to lord it over them, but affirms them in their decision in the matter. The Corinthians had reaffirmed their love to Paul, and Paul's desire was reconciliation of all parties.

The alternative to forgiveness in such a situation was the triumph of Satan's designs. Satan's wish is to produce discord that festers into lasting bitterness, unforgiveness and breaches between people. Ready forgiveness and joyful reconciliation is the way that the designs of Satan can be resisted in such matters.

A question to consider. What lessons can we learn from the way that Paul conceives of and exercises his apostolic authority in this chapter? How can we apply these lessons to the ways that we treat others who are under our authority? Our passage, which begins at the end of chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians, starts with an image of Christ as a victorious Roman general leading a triumphal procession. Paul and his fellow missionaries are like willing captives following in the train of the victorious Christ.

Like the incense that would accompany such a victory procession, Paul and his fellow missionaries are like the aroma of the knowledge of Christ diffused wherever they go, both among those who reject and among those who accept the message. The aroma of the knowledge of Christ also ascends to God, bringing the sweet smell of Christ to him, like the sacrifices of the old covenant. This aroma has a dual effect upon human beings.

For some it produces life as they respond in faith, while for others it yields death as they reject it. Paul expresses how serious and weighty his ministry is here. He recognises that such a ministry is beyond human sufficiency.

It is God alone who is the sufficiency of Paul and his companions for their work. In 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6, Paul provides a deftly theological and richly intertextual defence of his apostolic credentials, which seem to have been called into question by his opponents at points. To anyone who might suggest that he needs letters of recommendation, Paul counters with the fact that the Corinthian church itself is his letter of recommendation.

It is a letter written by Christ himself on tablets of flesh rather than on tablets of stone. This alludes to the New Covenant theme of God's writing on human hearts and replacing stone with flesh. In Jeremiah 31-34, Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

And in Ezekiel 36-27, And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules. This supports Paul's reference to himself and his missionary companions as ministers of the new covenant, of the life-giving spirit, rather than of the death-dealing law.

Richard Hayes observes of this, Paul's intertextual trope hints, in brief, that in the new covenant, incarnation eclipses inscription. The new covenant is enfleshed rather than inscribed, and its ministry centers not on texts, but on the spirit-empowered transformation of human community. Paul is not challenging scripture itself here.

For Paul, scripture is a dynamically living and life-giving word. Rather, he is challenging any ministry that is merely one of a disembodied text, without the power to effect transformation. To elaborate his case, Paul turns to Exodus chapter 24, as a passage that provides a powerful illustration of the nature of the glory of the old covenant.

In Exodus chapter 34 verses 29 to 35, and they were afraid to come near him. that the skin of Moses' face was shining, and Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. The old covenant and its ministry were not without glory.

The face of Moses, the great mediator of the old covenant, radiated with such dazzling reflected glory, that the Israelites could not bear to gaze at it. However, this reflected old covenant glory pales in comparison with the surpassing glory of the new covenant, The temporary and transitory glory of the old covenant is now being eclipsed by the enduring glory of the new. Even if a ministry of condemnation displayed such glory, the ministry of new covenant righteousness should be expected to exhibit an overwhelming splendor.

Paul writes that Moses covered his countenance with a veil, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end or the telos of what was transitory. The term telos has been taken by many to refer to the cessation of the supposedly fading glory of Moses' face. When Richard Hayes argues that we should interpret the term as referring rather to the goal or the purpose of the transitory covenant, he rewords Paul's argument in the passage as follows.

The veil on Moses' face hid from Israel the glory of God, which Moses beheld at Sinai, a glory that transfigured him. Israel could not bear looking at the transfigured person, and concentrated instead on the script that he gave them. That text, too, bears witness, in a more indirect or filtered manner, to the glory, to the person transfigured in the image of God, who is the true aim of the old covenant.

For those who are fixated on the text as an end in itself, however, the text remains veiled. But those who turn to the Lord are enabled to see through the text, to its telos, its true aim. For them the veil is removed, so that they, like Moses, are transfigured by the glory of God into the image of Jesus Christ, to whom Moses and the law had always, in a veiled fashion, pointed.

The old covenant, then, was a covenant of veils, hiding the glory of God, the veil of Moses, the veil of the tabernacle, the veil upon the law. The ministry of Moses, both the man and the text, was one of concealment, providing only glimpses of the glory that it harboured. The glory was present, but was not manifest.

The new covenant is a covenant of the removal of veils, the removal of the veil of the temple, the removal of the veil upon the text, and the unveiling of God's glory face in Jesus Christ. It is also characterised by openness. What was formerly hidden and concealed is now declared freely.

Paul's use of Moses in this chapter is a phenomenally dexterous deployment of biblical metaphor. It's a juxtaposition of similarity and dissimilarity to considerable illuminative effect. While drawing a sharp contrast between old and new covenant and their respective ministries, the brilliance of Paul's argument is seen in the way that he discloses the deep affinity between Moses and the new covenant, presenting Moses as a witness to the glory of Christ, anticipating the unveiling to come.

As Paul's argument unfolds, we begin to see that, while Moses may be a symbol of veiling, more fundamentally he is a symbol of unveiling, a point that surfaces in verse 16. Moses' act of entering God's presence and removing the veil becomes paradigmatic for the experience of Christian believers. We all, who with unveiled face look upon the reflected glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.

However, what was intermittently experienced by Moses in the old covenant is fundamentally and enduringly characteristic of the new. When Moses turned to the Lord, this is an allusion to chapter 34 of Exodus verses 34-35, he removed the veil from his face. While the precise reference of the Lord might seem to be ambivalent here, without clear Christological meaning, in light of Paul's description of Christ in the verses that follow, the glory of Christ who is the image of God, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, etc., I believe it is not inappropriate to give it full Christological weight.

That is to say, Paul may be suggesting here that the one whose glory Moses saw was Christ himself. Paul's use of Exodus chapter 34 then is not just a clever allegorical repurposing of the Old Testament text to illustrate a theological point, but is justified by the deep reality shared by Moses and new covenant believers. The glory that Moses saw was the glory face of the Son, the glory face that has been disclosed in Jesus Christ.

As with Moses, those who turn to Christ, in repentance and faith, are transfigured by the sight of his glory, with the effect of renewing them into his image. Meredith Klein has written, Glory is again to the fore when the Scriptures speak of man's recreation in God's image. The renewal of the divine image in man is an impartation to them of the likeness of the archetypal glory of Christ.

The mode of the impartation of Christ's glory, an image renewal, is described according to various figurative models appropriate to Christ's identity, either as spirit lord or as second Adam. Man's reception of the divine image from Christ, the glory presence, is depicted as a transforming vision of the glory and as an investiture with the glory. Moses is the Old Testament model for the former and Aaron for the latter.

Beholding the sinny eye revelation of the glory face transformed the face of Moses so that he reflectively radiated the divine glory. So we, beholding the glory of the spirit lord, are transformed into the same image. The end, or the telos of the Old Covenant, was the glorious renewal and transfiguration of humanity in the image and likeness of God.

Moses manifested this glory quite visually but he had to veil it for a people who weren't ready for it. In Christ we see both the transfigured humanity and the glory face of God himself which is the telos of all previous revelation. There is a pivotal move in Paul's argument in verse 14 which Hayes describes as follows.

In verse 13, Moses is the prophet and lawgiver who veils his own face. In verse 15, Moses is the sacred text read in the synagogue. The single intervening transitional sentence tells us that the veil over the minds of the readers is the same veil that Moses put on his face.

How can that be so? Because Moses the metaphor is both man and text and the narrative of the man's self-veiling is at the same time a story about the veiling of the text. A crucial implication of this is that the veiled glory of Moses is not just the glory of Moses the man but also the glory of the Old Testament scriptures that he stands for. Although Paul's earlier contrast between inscription and incarnation may have led some readers to expect that he was about to associate scripture with the veil concealing the transfigured humanity he makes the critical move of associating scripture not with the veil but with the glorious face of Moses that lay beneath it.

Having carefully developed the multi-layered metaphor of the veiled Moses Paul's stage is now set for the dramatic unveiling. Richard Hayes remarks again The rhetorical effect

of 2 Corinthians 3, verse 16 is exquisite because it enacts an unveiling commensurate with the unveiling of which it speaks. The text performs its trope in the reader no less than in the story.

And the final elegant touch, the trope is performed precisely through a citation of Moses. Moses' words are taken out of Exodus chapter 34, verse 34 unveiled and released into a new semantic world where immediately they shine and speak on several metaphorical levels at once. Thus, rather than merely stating a hermeneutical theory about the role of scripture in the new covenant 2 Corinthians 3, verses 12-18 enacts and exemplifies the transfigured reading that is the result of reading with the aid of the Spirit.

In other words, Paul uses the example of Moses' veiled face as a text that can be unveiled to show us the glory of Christ beneath. Paul's argument, which has been steadily building throughout the chapter now erupts into a magnificent crescendo. The face of Moses, the face of the law is no longer veiled when he turns, or when we turn, to the Spirit Lord, the Giver of Liberty.

For those who turn to Christ in repentance and faith the scripture is now seen to be the mirror in which we perceive the glory of the Lord Himself. Through gazing steadfastly at the glory revealed in that mirror we ourselves are transformed into the likeness of the one revealed there by the Spirit of Christ from glory to glory. As our reading of scripture is transformed in this new covenant manner we ourselves are transformed by our reading to bear the same image of the glory of Christ that we perceive within its mirror.

The telos, or the purpose of the scripture, the transformation of humanity is thereby achieved in us as the veil is removed from our hearts enabling us to perceive the glory of the Lord that fills it. The figural and Christological reading of scripture that Paul exemplifies here involves a sort of transfiguration of the text as the glory of the Lord is encountered within it. What had formerly been veiled is disclosed and opened up in Christ revealing His radiance throughout all its pages.

The mirror of God's glory precedes a greater revelation yet to come when we will see Christ face to face. The transformation that we currently experience is a partial one it's produced by a mediated encounter it will be surpassed by the direct vision which it anticipates and promises. Seeing Christ Himself will be the means of our transformation.

As 1 John 3, verse 2 says When He is revealed we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. There are times in our experience when we witness something truly and arrestingly beautiful some natural sight for instance that takes our breath away or a piece of music that is truly remarkable and transcendent. And on those occasions we are transfigured by the beauty that we witness.

Our faces open up. Cynicism, fear, doubt and distrust wash away and we light up with joy, awe, wonder, hope and love and we start to see things around us in a very different

light with a radiant glow to them. This is but a limited illustration of the way that we will be transfigured when we see the glory of Christ Himself.

It gives us the faintest glimpse of the great transfiguration that awaits humanity and all the creation in the age to come. And all of this is produced by the Spirit who communicates a freedom from God to us. A question to consider What are some of the ways in which Paul discloses the intense interrelation between the messengers of the Gospel, the content of the Gospel and the recipients of the Gospel in this passage? The first part of 2 Corinthians chapter 4 closely relates with the argument of the chapter that preceded it exploring the nature of the new covenant ministry and the way that it both contrasts with that of the old and was anticipated within it Paul giving the example of Moses' veiled face.

Paul also discussed the contrasting responses to his ministry back in chapter 2 verses 14-17 This began Paul's discussion of the nature of the new covenant ministry and now Paul reintroduces some of the threads of thought from the first two chapters not least in his discussion of the importance of candour and frankness as those in the service of the Lord. He discusses their comportment in their ministry. He connects his discussion here with that which immediately preceded it also beginning with a therefore.

What renders Paul and his companions sufficient for their ministry? They have been granted it by God's mercy. The ministry of the new covenant is a ministry of unveiling and a ministry of faithfulness and truth. This informs the way that Paul comports himself not as someone manipulating or misleading others but as someone presenting the truth openly.

Although some might claim that Paul's message is veiled it is only veiled to those who are perishing. Satan, described here as the God of this world is the one who shuts their eyes to the truth. Satan is spoken of as the God of this world as he has a dominion and servants.

He is not a God in the same way as God is God. Any veiling of the gospel does not arise from the way that Paul communicates it. He communicates it with clarity, candour and truth but to those whose eyes have been darkened by the evil one they do not see.

To others, however, it is a ministry of glory and unveiling. The gospel displays the glorious illumination of Christ who is the image of God. The description of Christ as the image of God is also seen in Colossians 1, verse 15.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For Paul, Christ is the archetypal image of God. We are created in the image and are transformed into the image of Christ as he enlightens us.

As we look upon the face and the life of Christ we see the glory of God therein. Paul

routinely identifies closely with his gospel which sets the terms for everything that he does. However, the content of the gospel is not Paul himself but the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Just as Paul isn't communicating the gospel with deceit or with obfuscation he is very clear about the content of the gospel and doesn't want it to be admixed with some proclamation of himself. Paul is not the master of his message as if the gospel gave him license to focus on all of his personal hobby horses. Faithful presentation of the gospel requires a certain modesty and self-effacement of the messenger to ensure that their personal fixations are never allowed to take the place of an unadulterated and unvarnished presentation of the truth of Christ and his Lordship.

As a slave of Christ, beholden to him Paul's position as a gospel minister is the humblest and most unassuming one and as a slave of Christ he is also a slave of the Corinthians for Jesus' sake. Once again, Paul's ministry is not about him. He is a slave.

He is, as he described it in chapter 2, like someone led as a captive in a triumphal procession behind Christ. As a minister of the gospel, Paul does not lord it over those to whom he ministers. Rather, he serves them as the slave of Jesus.

While he does represent the authority of his master to the Corinthians, he does so as the slave who is charged to serve the guests of his master. Paul has spoken of a new covenant and now he brings in themes of new creation. Just as God spoke into darkness in the first creation, so God brings dazzling light into the new creation.

Paul acts in the way that he does because God has initiated a work of new creation in his heart, bringing the radiance of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is possible that Paul is alluding to Isaiah 9 1-2 here as well. The light out of darkness is not just the light of creation, but the eschatological light, the long-awaited light that God brings into the world in Christ.

This is a theme that surfaces on various occasions in Paul's writings and also in the New Testament. For instance, Ephesians 5-6-14, where Paul speaks of Christians as children of the light, brought to life by the light and now radiating that light themselves. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Therefore do not become partakers with them. For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.

And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible. For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Paul explores paradoxes throughout this epistle. Here it is that of the life of Jesus being revealed as his ministers are delivered over to death. Paul had discussed the afflictions of the apostles to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4, verses 9-13.

There he presented himself as an example of faithful suffering and true spiritual life, in contrast to the puffed up and arrogant spirituality of the Corinthians, which was no true spirituality at all. Here his point is somewhat different. He is trying to show that the apostles' nearness to death, their sufferings and their weakness, actually testifies more effectively to the surpassing strength of God, which works powerfully through their limitations, being more powerfully seen on account of them.

Paul is here expressing in a more general manner what he already spoke about in chapter 1, verses 8-9. Paul compares his weakness to that of an earthen vessel, a fragile and inglorious container that could easily be broken and would readily be discarded. This sharpens the contrast between Paul and the power of God that is at work within him.

The vessel is not a delicate piece of precious pottery, but a cheap and expendable container. The value is entirely the contents. Such humble and unassuming vessels are by far the most appropriate vessels for bearing God's word, in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 27-29.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Such an earthen vessel is a vessel of God's creation, and a vessel that is completely at his disposal. In Jeremiah 19, verses 1-2 and 10-11, Israel is compared to a potter's vessel, which the Lord will break. Thus says the Lord, Go by a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom, at the entry of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you.

Then ye shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. A final possible allusion is to the story of Gideon and his 300 men in Judges 7, who held torches inside earthen jars that they broke. On the outside, what people see when they see Paul and his companions, are people afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and near to death.

However, there is the power of a new life contained within them, so that their afflictions, sufferings, difficulties, and struggles are not the full picture. In all of these trying situations, they are not crushed, not despairing, not forsaken, and not destroyed. They are carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that Christ's life might also be made manifest in them.

Paul quotes Psalm 116 verse 10, words of confident faith declared by the psalmist even when in the greatest affliction. Paul has the same sort of faith, confident in the resurrection power that will one day raise them up. Death will not be the final word.

They will one day be presented with the Corinthians in the Lord's presence. Paul's entire purpose in undergoing suffering is to bring glory to God and to minister to the people of Christ. As Christ's glory reaches more and more people, the result will be increased thanksgiving to God and greater glorification of Him.

Paul began this chapter by saying that they do not lose heart, and he concludes it by underlining that same point, repeating the same expression. He draws a succession of contrasts between the inner and the outer self, between the self that is visible, temporary, and to be stripped off Him in time, and the enduring, invisible, and inner life that comes from the illuminating work of God within. The inner self-outer self opposition is not based upon a soul-body dichotomy.

Rather, the inner self is the self in the sight of God. The outer self is the self in the presence of other human persons. Paul draws a succession of contrasts here.

Outer self, inner self, wasting away, being renewed day by day, light affliction, weighty glory, momentary affliction, eternal glory, things that are seen, things that are unseen, transient things, eternal things. Paul is teaching the Corinthians a new way of perceiving reality and their situation here. And he isn't just drawing a contrast between these two states.

There is also a paradoxical connection. The light, momentary affliction is exactly what is preparing us for the eternal weight of glory. The two states are bound up with each other.

Philippians 3, verses 10-11 That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Being conformed to Christ's death prepares us for resurrection. The inner self is daily being renewed.

Just as the outer self is wasting away, the inner self is having its youth continually restored. Recognising all of this, we must get our values straight. We must think about time differently, measuring the difference between that which is momentary and transient and that which is eternal, the difference between that which endures and that

which wastes away.

We must have a sense of gravity, discerning the difference between those things that are light and those things that truly have weight. And as the things that really matter the most are things that are unseen, we must learn to walk by faith rather than by sight. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways that the experience of Paul as he describes it in this chapter connects him with Christ? 2 Corinthians chapter 5 continues on from Paul's discussion of the treasures in jars of clay in chapter 4. There Paul spoke about the inner and the outer self, juxtaposing the two in a series of strong contrasts. Here he elaborates upon the contrast between earthly and heavenly dwelling. Our current home is like a tent, a temporary dwelling for people passing through, but we await a building from God, a glorious edifice not made with human hands prepared for us as an eternal dwelling.

Our current existence is one of groaning, of longing for the more enduring dwelling that we anticipate. At first glance some might think that what Paul is saying here is similar to what they might imagine a Gnostic saying. We need to be freed from the prison of the body.

However that isn't what Paul is saying at all. Paul elsewhere identifies persons very closely with their bodies, so although his analogy here might suggest a dissociation, that dissociation cannot be sustained. More importantly though, for Paul the greater choice is not between being embodied and not being embodied, but between two modes of embodiment.

Our present frail mortal embodiment, the jars of clay that he spoke of earlier, and the eternal glorious embodiment that we await. He is not looking to be stripped of the body so as to be left naked and unencumbered by it, but in order that he might be clothed with a glorious new body. Paul describes the same thing elsewhere, in Romans chapter 8 verses 22 to 23 for instance.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. The redemption of the body, the resurrection, is what Paul is awaiting here. Some have debated whether Paul is envisioning here the reception of the resurrection body immediately after death.

I don't believe that he is. However the way that he phrases things might suggest that we do receive the building from God in some sense upon the death of our current fleshly bodies. I don't believe Paul's primary concern here is to address or settle questions of the intermediate state.

In 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, the resurrection of the body seems to await the return of Christ. Rather, Paul's point here is that our current groaning in our bodies awaits not deliverance from embodiment, but a much greater and more glorious embodiment. Discussion of the intermediate state might distract from Paul's immediate point at this juncture.

Nevertheless, death itself, prior to our receiving our resurrection bodies, already involves some degree of entry into the new state. We already are being prepared for this by God. God's transformation of his people is already underway through the Holy Spirit's work within us, by whom we have both a foretaste and a down payment of the fuller redemption that we await.

The condition of being in the body is one in which we are away from Christ's immediate presence. For this reason, we must walk by faith rather than by sight. Paul explores this in terms of the juxtaposition between being at home in the body and being at home with the Lord.

Paul's personal preference would be being at home with the Lord. However, the greater concern is pleasing the Lord, recognising that we must all one day give an account of what we have done in the body. Paul describes the same preference in Philippians 1, verses 19-26.

For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me, yet which I shall choose I cannot tell, I am hard pressed between the two.

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. The suggestion in 2 Corinthians 5, as in Philippians I think, is that death removes us from embodied existence, but brings us into a more direct enjoyment of Christ's presence.

It frees us from our current jars of clay and the death that is at work within them. However, it still awaits the superior housing of the resurrection. After death we still haven't fully entered into the age to come, but we are not as grounded in this present age and enjoy to a much greater measure the anticipatory blessings of the spirit of resurrection and the life of the inner self, of which Paul has already spoken.

Nevertheless, as our priority with Paul should be pleasing God over everything else, we are content courageously to accept the afflictions and difficulties of life in our fleshly

bodies for his sake. Aware of how serious a matter it is to give account of the deeds performed in our bodies to God, Paul seeks to persuade others. The fear of the Lord is a powerful motivation for Paul.

Living by faith, he appreciates the gravity of divine judgment and the consuming fire of God's presence, and speaks to others in a manner fitted to convey this. Pleasing the Lord is of paramount importance. God is well aware of how Paul's heart stands in relation to him, and Paul trusts that the Corinthians too are able to perceive his sincerity and the reality of his mission, despite the jars of clay in which it is carried out.

If they truly perceived the character of Paul, they would have reason to boast of the work that God was accomplishing through him for their upbuilding. Paul makes an enigmatic statement at this point, This might refer to the contrast between the way in which Paul is caught up in the things of God, to the point of being considered a religious fanatic by some, and the rational and the sober-minded counsel that characterises much of his teaching. Paul is a man of remarkable visions, intense zeal and religious passions, but also a man of profound and careful thought and a gifted rhetorician.

Whichever he is characterised as, however, he is not engaged in self-promotion, but acts for the sake of God and the people to whom he is ministering. Paul's practice is entirely driven and bound by the surpassing love of Christ. Christ died for all of humanity.

Every human being is somehow implicated in Christ's death, in the death of the representative man. Even though not everyone enters into the newness of life in Christ, everyone has been claimed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who live are a subset of the entirety of humanity to which Paul has just referred.

These are the ones who have entered into the newness of life in Christ. Such persons, those who are being saved, must henceforth live for Christ, rather than for themselves. Like Paul, they should be characterised by a certain selflessness in their orientation, living for the sake of Christ and for others.

After appreciating the significance of Christ's death, nothing is seen in the same way again. A new era has dawned, and everything must be viewed differently. Paul used to view everything and everyone according to the flesh, but now he does so no longer.

Differences between Jews and Gentiles, between slave and free, between rich and poor, etc., may once have loomed very large in Paul's thinking, but now he views everyone differently, in terms of Christ. Prior to his conversion, Paul also viewed Christ from such a worldly perspective, perhaps seeing him as a heretic decisively condemned by being put to death. However, now the way that Paul sees Christ has been utterly transformed.

If anyone is in Christ, then, he is a new creation. Union with Christ is a central truth in this passage. The riches that we enjoy as Christians are enjoyed by virtue of our

participation in Christ.

As we are united to Christ by his Spirit, that which belongs to Christ becomes ours. The expected renewal of all things awaited at the end is already at work in the Christian. As a new creation, the Christian is born again, brought from death to life.

They are in anticipation of the long-expected new heavens and new earth already in effect. The Christian is like a stone being fashioned in the stonemason's yard, ready to become part of a glorious edifice that will one day be unveiled. Paul is still speaking about the nature of his ministry in this chapter, although his ministry is so completely entangled with his message that one cannot easily separate the one from the other.

The new creation, accomplished by Christ, is from God. Through Christ, God has reconciled Paul and his companions to himself, and has also given them a part in the reconciliation by which they themselves were reconciled. God shows his grace to us so that we might communicate it to others, both in the ways that we reflect it and in the ways that we declare it.

God forgives us and calls us both to forgive others and to communicate his message of forgiveness to them. Paul doesn't live for himself, but has become identified with the message of grace that he bears. It is as if God himself is appealing to people through Paul and his companions, as his ambassadors.

Paul isn't a passive recipient of God's salvation in Christ, but one who is actively and completely caught up in its work. The final verse of this chapter condenses the movement of God's grace in Christ into a short and powerful statement. For the sake of Paul and those associated with him, God made the sinless Christ to be a sin offering for us.

This, I believe, is what Paul means by becoming sin. And he does this in order that they might become the righteousness of God in him. Behind this statement are probably the words of Isaiah 53, verses 9-11.

And they made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him to grief.

When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days, the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

What does Paul mean by becoming the righteousness of God here? There is a sort of logic of exchange at work in this verse. Christ becomes sin, we become the righteousness of God in him. In this exchange, sin and the righteousness of God are

elements standing in directly contrastive juxtaposition.

For many, this idea of becoming the righteousness of God refers to the righteousness of Christ being imputed to our account. I think this does capture some important dimension of the picture. We have a new standing with God and account of Christ, and his righteousness becomes ours.

However, I don't think this goes far enough, and it also fails to give satisfactory answers to certain questions. For instance, why refer to the righteousness of God rather than the righteousness of Christ? Why not rather say, he put the guilt of our sin to the account of him who knew no sin, so that in him we might have his righteousness put to our account? Paul seems to be saying something more than merely that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to our account. We have become God's righteousness.

N.T. Wright has suggested that the righteousness of God here refers to the covenant faithfulness of God, observing, for instance, that we consistently see God describing his saving covenant faithfulness in such a manner in the prophets. This explanation is very promising on some levels. It fits in very nicely with the wider surrounding context, where Paul has become a manifestation of God's message of reconciliation as God makes his appeal through him.

However, it narrows the meaning of righteousness in a way that dulls the allusion to Isaiah 53, verse 11, that seems to be present. It also dulls the contrast with sin, which doesn't seem narrowly to refer to covenant unfaithfulness. I think that we might move towards a solution by thinking of righteousness less as a sort of thing that we might have in our account, or as an abstract moral quality, and more as a positive relational standing and relational activity.

Thinking in terms of righteousness as if it were a sort of thing, we can think of it as inert and inactive. Alternatively, some think of it in terms of an assessment relative to an absolute moral standard. Yet scripture routinely speaks of God's righteousness not as if the merit in his moral account, or as his absolute moral standard, his morally perfect being by which all things are measured, but rather as his powerful saving and judging activity in the world.

God's righteousness is dynamic and active. God's righteousness sets things to rights. It is this righteousness that Israel seeks when it calls God to act according to his covenant and promises.

It is this righteousness that is most fully seen in Christ, a righteousness by which God sets humanity to rights in his Son. Jesus talks about the need for the righteousness of his disciples to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. However, I don't believe that he is merely referring to doing the sort of thing that the scribes and Pharisees were doing, but just more scrupulously.

Rather, he refers to a radically different sort of righteousness. The righteousness in question is not one of mere sin avoidance, but a righteousness that is actively involved in setting the world to rights, participating in God's own saving work, joining in God's own work of restoration. It is seen in forgiving others, as we have been forgiven in Christ.

It is seen in pursuing reconciliation, rather than merely avoiding vengeance. As we are in Christ, the riches of his standing with the Father are enjoyed by us as his bride. However, even beyond this, we are also being transformed into new creatures in him by his Spirit.

When we act, we now act as those who are becoming Christ-like. The righteousness of God that set things right in Christ is now setting things right through us and in us. Christ entered fully into our condition, identifying with us in our sin, so that in him we might become conduits of God's saving righteousness.

This is why Paul will directly proceed to speaking of himself as a fellow worker with God. God's righteousness is not just enacted for us, but enacted in us and through us. A question to consider, looking back at chapters 2 and 3, how does Paul further elaborate the true sufficiency of the new covenant minister that he affirmed in those earlier chapters? In the previous chapter, Paul spoke of God working through himself and his companions.

In verse 20, Now in chapter 6, he continues that point, appealing to the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain. God's saving righteousness that restores and sets things to rights is at work in and through Paul. Paul is concerned that the Corinthians received the grace of God in a way that proves fruitful.

He quotes a verse from a passage concerning salvation in Isaiah 49, verses 7-13. In a time of favour I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you. I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, come out, to those who are in darkness.

They shall feed along the ways, on all bare heights shall be their pasture. They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall stride them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up.

Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene. Sing for joy, O heavens, and exalt, O earth. Break forth, O mountains, into singing, for the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted.

God's long-awaited righteousness has come near for the Corinthians too, and they ought to seize the day of salvation, not letting it pass them by. The fullness of time has come, God has sent his Son, and people must respond. Entrusted with this ministry, Paul has

been careful to present no obstacle or offence.

He has, as he argues in 1 Corinthians, become all things to all men, to ensure that responding favourably to the message is as easy as it could possibly be. No hindrance or discouragement is presented by Paul in his speech or his conduct. Paul follows this by presenting a list of hardships that he endures in his ministry.

He has willingly taken these trials upon himself for the sake of his calling. Once again, he is presenting a portrait of the character of his ministry, a character that befits the message and the master that he serves. The actual list of hardships is carefully structured.

It begins with a list of situations and circumstances in which he has undertaken his service, in verses 4 and 5. In verses 6 and 7, he describes the manner of his ministry in these situations and circumstances, and the virtues and the means that have distinguished it. In verse 8, he begins to list the extremes of the responses through which he has remained steadfast. And from the end of verse 8 until the end of verse 10, the list explores the paradoxical character of Christian ministry, largely along the fault line of the inner self-outer self division that he has discussed earlier.

Paul presented another hardship list back in chapter 4, verses 7 to 12. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. In that passage, it was the countervailing power of the life of Christ against the death and suffering of the body that was foregrounded.

Towards the end of the hardship list in chapter 6, it is the paradoxical forces that Paul and his fellow ministers carry within themselves that is most apparent. Paul experiences the power of these immense and opposing forces, the fault line between two ages, within his very self. Death and life are not merely neatly divided between inner and outer selves, but are experienced within a single person.

Sorrow and joy, poverty and immense wealth, life and death are simultaneous presences in the life of the faithful minister. This hardship list continues Paul's defence of his ministry that he has been developing through the letter to this point. It demonstrates that Paul's mettle as a minister has been tested.

It also manifests once again the way that Paul's existence and self-understanding consistently draw from the horizon of the age to come. Paul now addresses the

Corinthians directly, as Corinthians for the first time. Paul is making explicit the intent of his argument at this point.

Throughout the letter, Paul's desire is for the Corinthians to bring him joy. His heart yearns for them, and the pain of the tensions that have clearly come between them weigh very heavily upon him. He expresses his affection to them as a father would to his children.

Indeed, as it was through Paul that they first received the gospel, it is appropriate for him to address them in such an intimate manner. He has unburdened his heart to them, and his heart is wide open to them, earnestly desiring to receive their love back in turn. However, he fears that they have closed their hearts to him, or at least restricted their affections towards him.

He beseeches them to open up their hearts to him again. The concluding verses of this chapter have provoked some debate among commentators. Several regard them as a non-Pauline insertion in the context.

There is a seeming jolt between verse 13 and verse 14, and if we were to remove the verses from chapter 6 verse 14 to chapter 7 verse 1, the text would flow very smoothly between those two points. Paul was just making a warm, emotional appeal, an appeal to which he returns in chapter 7 verse 2, and then he moves into something more like a rebuke. Beyond the sudden transition are some features of this passage that suggest to some that it is non-Pauline.

There is some vocabulary that isn't found elsewhere in Paul. There is a chain of quotations, and whereas Paul will typically distinguish quotations within such a chain, here they are not so distinguished. Furthermore, the introductory expression, as God said, is used here, an expression that Paul doesn't use elsewhere.

Some have also claimed that there are tensions between the theological emphases of this passage and those in Paul more generally. Others see it as an insertion in the context, but argue that it is from a lost Pauline text, perhaps the letter that he referred to in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 to 10. I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people, not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters.

Since then you would need to go out of the world. As Paul deals with a number of elements of this passage in 1 Corinthians, where he refers to being unequally yoked in marriage to unbelievers in chapter 7 verses 12 to 15, avoiding all communion with idols in chapters 8 to 10, and separating from immoral persons at the end of chapter 5, he might be clarifying this supposedly earlier letter, at least according to some commentators. What are we to make of all of this? First, I think the argument for a Pauline insertion presents good arguments against the claim that the theology is non-

Pauline.

These verses comport very well with Paul's message elsewhere. One of the problems with the theory of an insertion is that it fails to give good explanations of how and why it came to be inserted at this particular point. The arguments from unusual terminology are also not as strong as they might initially appear.

There are plenty of passages of undisputed Pauline origin where rare or unique terminology, what scholars called hapax legomena, are used. Other arguments are weaker on closer examination too. Paul's manner of quotation is not uniform, but shows considerable variety.

For instance, in Romans chapter 3 verses 10 to 18, he quotes a chain of Old Testament texts. He also uses expressions similar to, as God said, elsewhere. Nor are seeming digressions unknown in Pauline epistles.

David Garland argues that what we have here is a pattern of argumentation that we also find elsewhere in Paul. In Romans chapter 3 verses 10 to 18, a catena of citations concludes a section of Paul's argument running from chapter 1 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 20. Furthermore, he observes that the order of Paul's argument here can be loosely paralleled with the order of the argument in 1 Corinthians chapters 4 to 6. If this is not an insertion then, we must give an account of what it is doing here.

I find Garland's suggestion here quite convincing. From chapter 2 to chapter 6, Paul has been defending his ministry and the manner of his addressing the Corinthians. The issues raised in these verses are issues that are clearly issues of great concern in Corinth, as we have already seen in 1 Corinthians.

He has written a painful letter to them and there have been tensions between him and the Corinthians. Idle food and sexual immorality were manifestly problems in Corinth, but it seems that the practices hadn't been effectively rejected. The weak among the Corinthians weren't a party that were presenting a case for themselves, so much as they were spiritually vulnerable persons in danger of being wounded by the liberties that the strong were taking.

Paul had dealt with these issues in his first letter, but it may well be that his arguments weren't heeded by some, perhaps leading to direct conflict with a leading member, the wrong that was done that he refers to, and the painful letter that Paul had to write. Now, having laid out a defense of his apostleship and its ethos, opened his heart to the Corinthians, expressed his deep love and concern for them, and his greater confidence in their positive response, he expresses his fundamental case in a pithy and forceful manner once again. The point of these verses, then, is to express the sharpest possible antithesis between the people of God and the world.

The people of God must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Here Paul seems to be referring to more than just marriage, although marriage would also be in view. It is likely that eating food sacrificed to idols at shared feasts might be the background here.

Deuteronomy 22, verse 10 is the underlying text. You shall not plough with an ox and a donkey together. This is a symbolic commandment talking about the need for a difference and division to be maintained between the people of God and those who are unbelievers.

Paul elaborates this antithesis in a series of oppositions expressed in strong rhetorical questions. The difference between righteousness and lawlessness, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, believers, unbelievers, the temple of God, and idols. And then he elaborates upon the fact that the people of God are the temple of God, the place where God dwells.

And this is where he begins his series of quotations. Leviticus chapter 26, verses 11 to 12. I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you, and I will walk among you and will be your guard, and you shall be my people.

God has set his people apart and they must live accordingly. Isaiah chapter 52, verse 11. Depart, depart, go out from there, touch no unclean thing, go out from the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord.

Salvation has come near and the people of God must separate themselves as God comes on the scene. Ezekiel chapter 20, verse 34. I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out.

God is going to deliver his people from the nations among which they have been scattered. And when he does that, he is going to deal with the unfaithful in their midst, so they must be careful. Ezekiel chapter 20, verse 38.

I will purge out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel, then you will know that I am the Lord. He also quotes from the first part of 2 Samuel chapter 7, verse 14.

I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. He joins that with the teaching of Deuteronomy chapter 32, verses 18 to 19. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

The Lord saw it and spurned them because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. Paul is alluding to a wide selection of scripture here, all testifying to the same fundamental truth, the divide between the righteous and the wicked that must be established and maintained, especially in the face of the coming judgment of God.

However, it is important to recognize that it all ends on a strong note of promise, a point that Paul will underline in the first verse of chapter 7. A question to consider.

How do we display the holy separateness to which scripture calls us? From chapter 6, verse 14 to chapter 7, verse 1, Paul charges the Corinthians to separate themselves from unbelievers, behaving appropriately as the temple of the living God. The first verse of chapter 7 concludes this exhortation, but draws attention to the fact that our separation from wickedness is chiefly motivated by incredible promises that God has given to us. He has promised us that he will live with us, walk among us, that he will be our God, and that we will be his people, and that he will be our father and we his sons and daughters.

In chapter 6, verses 11 to 13, Paul wrote, We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians. Our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.

In return, I speak as to children, widen your hearts also. Now he returns to the same note of appeal. There should be no obstacle to the Corinthians opening their hearts up to Paul.

He hasn't wronged anyone, corrupted anyone, or taken advantage of anyone. His point is not to condemn or shame them in his defence of himself. He reiterates his deep devotion to and affection for them.

His love for them will endure through both life and death. Their destinies are intertwined. Paul is speaking far more directly here than he has done in the earlier chapters, in unburdening himself to the Corinthians.

Earlier, in chapter 2, verses 1 to 3, Paul had written, And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice. For I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. Paul's desire had been to be caused to rejoice by the Corinthians, and it appears that this had occurred.

Although his relationship with them had been painful for a time, he now had been reassured by them and delights in them, finding them to be a source of joy in his affliction. His boldness in speech with them is occasioned by his confidence that they will receive it appropriately. By openly expressing his pride and confidence in them, he presents a further foundation for his forthrightness of speech with them.

It is because of his high regard for them that he feels able to speak as directly as he does to them. Paul returns to matters he discussed earlier on in the letter. In chapter 2 verses 12 to 13, Paul had spoken of the distress that he had felt when Titus wasn't at Troas.

Paul's anguish was most likely occasioned by the fact that Titus was the one who was to bring him word of the Corinthians. In Titus' absence, he was in painful suspense about how the Corinthians felt towards him and how they had received his painful

correspondence. However, when Titus finally arrived, the news that he brought of the Corinthians was a cause of great comfort to Paul as he communicated the feelings of the Corinthians to Paul.

In the comfort brought by Titus, Paul sees the hand of God. At the beginning of the letter, he had spoken of the way that God brings comfort to his people. In Titus' return, Paul experiences God's consolation.

At this point, we start to get a sense of the matter that had caused the pained relations between Paul and the Corinthians. The Corinthians had felt wounded by Paul's letter. It seems most likely that someone in Corinth had acted wrongly towards Paul or perhaps to another member of the missionary party, perhaps Timothy, causing him considerable pain and grief, especially when he feared that the other Corinthians would finally take the side of the one who had wronged him.

as they had not properly rebuked the man. However, their subsequent response had made very clear that they were innocent in the matter. And from chapter 2, verses 5-8, it seems that the offender himself had also felt appropriate sorrow for his wrong.

The effectiveness of their grief, that it was not merely sterile remorse, but sorrow that was fruitful in repentance, served to manifest the innocence of the Corinthians of the wrong, but also caused Paul joy, as it was evidence of a decisive shift in the relationship that the Corinthians had with him, and a warming of affections in a formerly strange relationship. What Paul terms worldly grief doesn't actually produce change. It mostly just laments unwanted outcomes.

However, godly grief leads to godly transformation. For the Corinthians, it had borne fruit in a passionate expression of concern to communicate their innocence and their true affections towards Paul. Paul's chief purpose in writing the letter had not been to vindicate or avenge himself, nor had it been driven by a desire to punish or get the Corinthians to discipline the wrongdoer.

Rather, his principal design had been to spur them to a renewed expression of their commitment to him and his companions. The bonds of fellowship are paramount in Paul's mind here. Besides being comforted by the return and the news brought by Titus, Paul and his companions' joy was compounded by the joy of Titus himself, who had been blessed by the Corinthians.

Paul's statements here should not blind us to the less encouraging news that Titus seems to have brought too, for instance, about the Corinthians' feelings about Paul's council visit. However, right now, the relief and encouragement are at the forefront of Paul's mind. Paul appears to have expressed his confidence in the Corinthians to Titus before sending him, enthusiastically praising them to him.

For all of the Corinthians' faults, Paul was a proud spiritual father and couldn't help sharing his delight and confidence in his children in the faith. Titus himself had been encouraged by and his heart knit to the Corinthians. Paul will soon be sending him back to them to arrange the collection, which he will start to discuss in the following chapter.

Paul concludes this chapter by declaring his confidence in the Corinthians again. His confidence, of course, is not just in the good character of the Corinthians themselves, but primarily in God's work that is going on among them. A question to consider, what lessons can we learn about the character of Christian ministry from Paul's relationship with the Corinthians? 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and the chapter that follows concern the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul has already spoken of this collection back in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 1 to 4. Now concerning the collection for the saints, As I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as you may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. Paul is organizing a symbolic and a much needed gift from various Gentile churches to the churches in Judea. Titus has experienced considerable success among Macedonian churches, but the response from the Corinthians has been somewhat less enthusiastic.

Paul presents the Macedonians as examples to the Corinthians in this endeavor. Now Paul is sending Titus back to the Corinthians, hoping to encourage them in the matter of the collection. When we read a passage like this, we may wonder what it has to do with what has gone before in the letter.

Paul's sampling has some helpful observations about thematic connections. Paul has been emphasizing his ministry, but now speaks of a ministry that the Corinthians can exercise as a sort of a return. The Corinthians can participate in the ministry of reconciliation that Paul has spoken of by giving to the Jewish Christians in such a manner.

The theme of abundance and the overflowing of abundance has been mentioned by Paul in a few contexts already. In chapter 1 verse 5, in chapter 3 verse 9, in chapter 4 verse 15. It seems to be a characteristic feature of the gospel, and now he calls for the Corinthians to express this in their giving.

He has spoken of the Corinthians' zeal and earnestness, as reported by Titus, and now he calls for those traits to be expressed in the collection. The theme of glory has been prominent to this point in the letter, and now he speaks of the collection as something that will bring glory to Christ. Finally, the multifaceted theme of grace and gift pervades

this chapter, as it has the rest of the letter.

The collection is a very concrete expression of grace in action. Our Lord preached a message of good news to the poor, yet for many of his followers today, the gospel message and Christian concern for the poor stand in uncertain and uneasy relation. Although few would deny that Christians have no special duty to the poor, maintaining this duty in the context of a full-bodied Christian faith has proven surprisingly challenging.

For some, the Christian message that summons people to the works of mercy can be reduced to a vanishing mediator for a generic message of social justice and welfare. Christ's teaching and example may be invoked to underwrite and inspire the moral fervency of a secularized social activism, yet in the final analysis, Christ may prove dispensable for it. This is typically coupled with a shift from Christ to the government as the agent that must affect the awaited kingdom's advent, and from the church to secular society as its focal community.

Christ ceases to be set forth as the king of the coming kingdom, the one to whom every knee must bow. He is diminished in stature to the level of a mere moral teacher, exemplar, and vocal advocate for social justice. A smile of universal benevolence lingers as, like the Cheshire cat, Christ himself gradually disappears.

In other quarters, concerns about the wayward trajectory of a social gospel, coupled with wariness about the overemphasis upon works among Protestants, have led many conservative Christians theologically to minimize the importance of Christian charity, lest it come to displace Christ and his centrality. Christian charity must be handled as a matter of secondary, peripheral, or even extraneous concern. Yet when we read passages such as 2 Corinthians 8-9, a vision of Christian practice emerges for which the works of mercy operate in a close and inseparable relation with the specific claims of the Christian gospel.

The modern reader of the Pauline epistles, who hasn't paid sufficient attention to the Book of Acts, can easily fall into the trap of regarding the Apostle Paul principally as a thinker, whose travels, church planting, and charitable work were largely incidental to his theological labors and thought. That the Pauline corpus consists of occasional letters to particular parties is also often a fact passed over without reflection. Yet both a careful reading of the epistles and of the Book of Acts reveals that the various dimensions of the Apostle Paul's labors were firmly bound up together.

As the Apostle to the Gentiles, one of Paul's chief goals was to establish the union of Jewish and Gentile Christians in a single household, functioning according to a single economy of grace. His theological work consistently undergirds and propels his practical labors. Collecting for the poor, in particular the poor in Jerusalem, was one of the things that Paul was charged to do by the lead Apostles, the pillars of the Church, in Jerusalem

in Galatians 2-7-10.

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles, and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. Whether in letter writing, traveling and missionary work, dispatching fellow workers to various parts of the Church, or in the raising of charitable funds for Christians in Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul tirelessly labored to forge a unified economy and communication network between Churches across the Roman Empire.

In the circulation of Pauline epistles, for instance, specific Churches passed on both the revelation given to them and their examples to other Churches, born by messengers who would serve the receiving Church in the name of the sending Church and enjoy hospitality in return. You should also notice the way that Paul will consistently refer to other Churches as examples to the Churches to whom he is writing. Here it is the example of the Macedonian Christians that Paul brings forward for the Corinthians to follow.

As Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians in their raising of a financial gift for the Christians in Jerusalem, he does what he does in places such as Romans 15, 25-27. He presents a rich theological and rhetorically shrewd rationale for his charitable work. He mobilizes key themes of his epistles to encourage those receiving them to these endeavors.

Verse 7 exhibits some of this as Paul frames the gift for the Jerusalem Christians in terms of the grace that the Corinthians have themselves received. Especially striking is the way that Paul presents the giving that he is calling the Corinthians to as simultaneously a divine gift that he is desiring to see them abound in, a gift of which the Macedonian Churches are exemplary recipients, which he emphasizes at the start of the chapter in verses 1 and 2. In their practice of liberality, the Corinthians will receive the divine gift of giving. Here we see a logic that is more fully developed in the chapter that follows, where Paul speaks of God's abounding gift of his grace as that which makes possible our own liberality by giving us to participate in his own giving.

We should bear in mind here the way that the gifts of the Spirit in Pauline theology function as divine gifts by which the members of Christ's body are given to represent and participate in God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the whole. In such a manner, the liberal giver is the one who most fully receives. This paradox is characteristically Pauline and perhaps especially fitting in the book of 2 Corinthians, within which a power in weakness

paradox is foregrounded in later chapters.

Paul proceeds to speak of Christ, who was rich, becoming poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. As is often the case, Paul frames Christian practice both in terms of the example of Christ and then also in terms of the example presented by other Christians that we should follow. The relationship between poverty and riches in this statement also has elements of paradox, akin to those of James 1, verses 9-10.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. The heavenly riches that we have been given are discovered through a spiritual orientation that most readily grows in the soil of material poverty, what Oliver O'Donovan terms a dependence upon God and openness to his kingdom. God's riches are received in spiritual poverty, something which the puffed-up Corinthians often fail to exhibit.

Paul's purposeful avoidance of command in favour of exaltation, as we see in verse 8, is also both typical and noteworthy. For the Corinthians' act of giving to have its appropriate character, it must be done by their own volition, not under any compulsion or burdensome obligation. Paul is pointedly not imposing a tax, but is rather encouraging the Corinthians to come into the fuller possession of a gift and to follow the example of Christ, so that the fruitfulness of their gratitude and the abundance of their giving will redound to God's own glory.

Paul then seeks to summon the Corinthians into the freedom of the abundant gift of Christ, in the full receipt of which they would overflow in joyful giving. As elsewhere, Paul's conviction that the Spirit fulfils the law in the hearts of Christians leads him to adopt a rhetoric of persuasion and exaltation, appealing to the will liberated by the Spirit, for which the paths of the law's fulfilment will be the paths of freedom. The notion of equality in verse 14 should probably be read against a Greek background, where it was connected both with accounts of friendship and with politics.

In the first place, in ministering to the needs of the Judean Christians, the Corinthians would be expressing the reality of the fellowship of the saints, as we see in verse 4. In the second place, the ministering of the Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would be a striking political gesture, of which L.L. Wellborn observes, The politically superior inhabitants of a Roman colony must demonstrate their submission to conquered provincials in Jerusalem, in order to achieve equality. The equality advocated for here, as in the case of the oneness spoken of in Galatians 3, verse 28, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus, shouldn't be confused for some generalised egalitarian commitment on Paul's part. It is an equality grounded firmly in the event of Christ's action, and in the new reality of the Church, not in some liberal convictions that Paul holds about human persons and societies as such.

The fact that the Jerusalem Christians are to be the recipients of the gift is not insignificant either. The equality that Paul calls for relates to the reciprocity described in Romans 15, 25-27. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, for they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them.

For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. In the giving of such gifts, the bond between Jews and Gentiles in the Church and in the Gospel would be strengthened and a fellowship galvanised through the reciprocal ministry of the gifts of Christ. This giving is a decidedly theological act then.

Paul's reference to Exodus 16 is arresting in this context for many reasons. Exodus 16, verse 18 reads, But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack, each of them gathered as much as he could eat. This verse comes from the account of God's providential gift of manna to the children of Israel during the Exodus, and Paul's use of it in this context is quite remarkable.

Our initial impression might be that Paul's use of the verse is somewhat at odds with its original context. In Exodus, the verse relates to the perfect sufficiency of God's provision for the needs of each of the Israelite families. However, in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, Paul uses the same verse to bolster his appeal to the Corinthians, the ones who have much, to give to the Jerusalem Christians, the ones who have little.

The equality is not immediately established in the divine act of provision itself, but will only be realised through the participation of the Corinthians in ministering to the Jewish Christians. This, however, fits with the greater themes of these chapters. The gift and provision of God is to be ministered and enjoyed through and in the gifts of his people to each other.

The allusion to the gift of the manna might also excite other connections in the minds of the heroes of this passage. It relates the early Christian church to the Exodus generation and implicitly situates them within the messianic age, as Wellborn suggests. As they are being led out of the Egypt of sin and death by Christ, they are being fed by him.

A further possible connection would be to the celebration of the supper. The Christians sharing in the bread of the supper corresponded with the Israelites feeding on the manna. However, while the bread of the manna was gathered in an equal manner, the bread of the supper is to be distributed in an equal manner.

By means of the manna allusion, Paul may subtly conceptually relate the supper to the distribution of resources between Christians in the ministry of gifts. Note also the

references to communion, *koinonia*, in verse 4. Perhaps there is some indication here that for Paul, the supper must be validated in the practice of the works of mercy and ministry in the body of Christ. If you are sharing the bread and the wine with your brother or sister in Christ, you ought also to share with them from your abundance when they find themselves in need.

Although contemporary Christian approaches to charity are often only loosely expressive of deeper Christian theological convictions, and thus at risk of either displacing or eclipsing them, or being marginalized for the sake of them, Paul's theology manifests no such weakness. Rather, Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians is grounded in, and their practice will be an affirmation of, both the union of Jews and Gentiles in one body in Christ, and the shape of the Christ event. It is expressive of their situation in the new exodus of the Messianic age, a blessed participation in the liberality of God's own gift in Christ, and an enjoyment of the freedom of the will liberated by the Spirit.

Rediscovering these foundations of Christian charity in the Gospel enables us to rediscover the significance of the works of mercy as witnesses to the truth of what God has done in Christ, and also revelatory of the beauty of the form of God's work in Christ. Whether Christians sideline the work of mercy in order to maintain the primacy of the Gospel, or pursue them in ways that uproot them from the uniqueness of the Gospel message, the New Testament teaching on the subject is being abandoned in these cases. However, in the faithful exercise of Christian charity, we bear testimony to the abundant and overflowing gift that God has given us in Christ, and we also testify to the freedom that we are granted to participate in His liberality.

In societies defined by the opposition between rich and poor, we bear testimony to divine riches received in spiritual poverty, calling the poor to the spiritual orientation appropriately corresponding to their material condition, and the rich, who almost all of us are, both their responsibility to and their need to follow the example of the poor. In atomised societies, we bear testimony also to a social body that crosses class and socio-economic boundaries. It holds people together in a loving communion of mutual service and regard, and also unites them in a desire to serve those without.

In these respects, Christian charity far exceeds secular charity and its political consequences. In it is disclosed an event that precedes and exceeds any human initiative or instigation, a divine beneficence that has burst forth in history, and which is beyond all containment. It reveals a new economy that escapes the logic of scarcity, a paradoxical gift which is received in the giving.

It arises from a new liberating impulse that is the Spirit's work within us. It subverts the hierarchical opposition between rich and poor that secular charity all too often reinforces, and it binds giver and receiver together in a communion of reciprocal service. Practised faithfully, a pale reflection of a kingdom beyond all earthly kingdoms can be

seen within it.

A question to consider, what are some respects in which the vision of charity that Paul presents here shows up the failures and weaknesses of dominant visions of charity within modern society? 2 Corinthians chapter 9 continues Paul's discussion of the gift to the saints in Jerusalem from the previous chapter. Paul makes a well-calculated rhetorical appeal to the Corinthians here. He is quite invested in their response, because he has boasted about them to the Macedonians, much as he boasted about the Macedonians to them in the previous chapter.

The Macedonians' positive response, he described in the previous chapter, was spurred in part by the Corinthians' own initial zeal for the collection. The Macedonians had gotten the impression that the Corinthians had surpassed them in their zeal in this matter, but now the Macedonians, who had caught the zeal for the collection from Paul's report about the Corinthians, might find out that the Corinthians had grown sluggish. Paul is concerned that if some Macedonians accompany him when he visits the Corinthians and finds their collection incomplete, both he and the Corinthians would lose face.

For this reason, Paul has sent on an advance party to prepare the Corinthians for his visit, so that they have the collection that they have promised ready in time. Paul is concerned that it be a willing gift, not a sort of tax. It should be an overflow of grace and love.

The willingness of the gift is extremely important and determines its nature and the blessing associated with it. Paul isn't commanding the Corinthians to give. To command them to give willingly would be to undermine the character that their gift must have.

The gift should be an expression of their hearts and a communication of their love and gratitude. However, he is very strongly exhorting them to do so. An appropriate gift will be self-determined, without reluctance, without external compulsion, and cheerful.

There is something about the ideal character of Christian obedience revealed here. Such loving action from the heart is the character of true gift and service. And this is all integral to the logic of grace.

God causes his grace to abound to us to the end of our fruitfulness in good works. These good works are works of gratitude, works that flow from the heart. God makes all grace abound to us, so that we may have all sufficiency in all things at all times.

The repeated alls underline the fullness and the comprehensive character of the grace of God, as do the terms abound and sufficiency and these sorts of expressions of completeness. God addresses all of our needs in every situation. And this is all so that we might abound in every good work.

The fullness and extensiveness of God's grace is answered by the fullness and

extensiveness of our freely given good works. These good works are not ways that we earn God's grace, but are ways that we respond to and live out of God's grace. They are the appropriate gratitude that answers to God's prior gift.

Good works are necessary for the Christian, as they are the very way that we live out of the reality of God's grace and goodness to us. God is scattering his righteousness abroad, providing what the poor need. His righteousness is his covenant keeping justice, his goodness to his people.

And this distribution is what supplies seed to us and the harvest that results. We become the righteousness of God as we become fellow workers with him in this manner. God provides us with what we need to do the good works that he has prepared for us.

Grace produces grace. God's gift of grace to us is a scattering of seed to sow us, involving us in a cycle of grace ourselves. We must become participants in the spread and the growth of grace ourselves, and then we will enjoy the bountiful fruits.

Paul argues that the gift of the Corinthians, which arises from the gifts that they themselves have received, will produce a rich and bountiful harvest. Not only will they be providing for the needs of the Jerusalem Christians, they will also be proving themselves fertile soil for the seed of God's grace, as the seed of his grace in themselves produces a bumper crop of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving and the giving of glory to God is what it is all intended to lead to.

As a consequence of the Corinthians' generosity in expression of their thanksgiving for what they have received from God, the Jews in the Gospel, much thanksgiving will result. The Jerusalem Christians will glorify God for what he has done through the Corinthians. The hearts of the Jerusalem Christians will be more knit to the Corinthians, and they will long for greater fellowship with the Corinthians and intercede for them, recognizing the greatness of God's grace to them.

This will all serve the purpose of Paul's ministry of reconciliation, which isn't just about reconciling man to God, but also about reconciling man to man, Jews to Gentiles, slave to free, male to female. God's grace produces grace in its recipients, and expressions of this grace produce the return of that grace to God in joyful thanksgiving. Grace drives the entirety of Christian existence.

Once again, it is in the context of a supposedly mundane and practical issue, a relief collection for Christians in Jerusalem, that some of Paul's richest theological reflection is found. In this case, a discussion of the way that grace must animate everything about our lives as Christians, and how Christian good works are the germination and growth of the seeds of grace within our lives. Recognizing the logic of grace as Paul describes it here, we'll also see that our appropriate expression of grace leaves us richer even as we are giving to others.

The more that God's gracious gift to us is expressed in our gracious gifts to others, the more that we come into possession of God's gift. A question to consider, what light might this passage shed upon the knotty issue of faith and works as they relate to our standing before God? 2 Corinthians chapter 10 represents a significant shift in the tone of the letter, to the degree that a number of scholars have argued that it is either part of the earlier painful letter that Paul sent to the Corinthians, or another letter that he sent subsequently. While there has been rebuke at various points in the letter to this point and polemic, the urgency and the polemical tone of much of chapters 10 to 13 feels a bit jarring after the joy and the relief of chapter 7. Various explanations have been advanced by those arguing for the unity of the letter.

Some, such as Ben Witherington, have argued that an understanding of the rhetorical techniques of the day supports the unity of the letter. Others, such as Murray Harris, observe the literary unity of the letter, but believe that Paul probably received some further news from the Corinthian church while he was still writing the letter. As Harris observes, it is quite reasonable to presume that Paul's letters would have been composed and written over a period of days or weeks or months, during which time various developments might have occurred.

Beyond the fact that they are carefully crafted literary works that would have taken some time to put together, we need to consider that Paul had to wait for a suitable bearer to bring them to the church to which he was sending them. Some such explanation is far more reasonable than the idea that the ending of the letter from chapters 1 to 9 was lost, and the beginning of a supposed other letter from chapters 10 to 13 was also lost without a trace. Chapter 10 begins with another reference to Paul's anticipated visit.

He wants to come to them in a spirit of meekness and gentleness, which is the ideal way of restoring people according to Galatians 6. Paul also speaks of meekness and gentleness as characteristic of Christ. As a minister of Christ, this is the way that Paul wants to approach them. We've already seen Paul draw attention to the apparent contrast between his manner with them in his presence and his manner with them in his absence.

There are similar statements in 1 Corinthians 4.9-21 And I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love in a spirit of gentleness? The Corinthians have the choice which Paul they want to visit.

Paul would much prefer it to be the gentle Paul rather than the bold and forceful Paul, and he entreats them to allow him to come to them as a joyful father rather than as one who has the painful task of enforcing discipline. The character of Paul and his companions seems to have been maligned by some in the Corinthian situation, and he

needs to vindicate himself against the false accusations of his opponents. Paul may minister in the world in the current age and in the realm of the body, walking in the flesh, but he does not operate on the terms of these things.

Paul and his associates act with powerful force, albeit as people who do so in the weakness of their flesh. Paul describes his activity in military terms here. He may appear weak, but he has resources that they might not be taking into account.

He is a sort of warrior in the gospel, prepared to pacify all resistance, destroying opposition and taking thoughts captive, much as he compared himself to a captive earlier in the letter. At various points in Paul's epistles, we need to engage in what some have called shadow reading. We don't have first-hand texts or teachings from Paul's opponents, so we need to infer their teachings and positions from Paul's arguments against them.

Here the impression we get is that some of his opponents claim to belong to, or to represent Christ in some special way, setting them apart from others. And Paul clearly will not allow such a position to be entertained. Paul has an authority relative to the Corinthians.

It's given for their upbuilding. Although he's used military language and the language of destruction earlier on, the authority that he's been given has not fundamentally been given for that purpose. Rather, it's been given for their upbuilding.

Paul's opponents attack his consistency. They seem to claim that there's a discrepancy between the weighty, threatening and intimidating Paul projected by the letters, and the meek and underwhelming Paul that visits in person. This apostle's bark is much worse than his bite.

Yet Paul makes clear that his authority is for the sake of building up, not destroying. His letters are not designed to frighten, but to build up. If he does give warnings, it's not in order to frighten or threaten, but in order to build up, ultimately.

That is the end for which they are given. Paul's ministry, whether physically present and in person, or at a distance by letter, is consistent. It's driven by the same principles throughout.

There are not two different Pauls. Paul's world was a highly status-conscious world, and concerns for status seemed to have been at play in the Corinthians situation also. Paul had earlier used such dynamics of mutual comparison to encourage the Corinthians to match up to the example of the Macedonians, much as he had used the same dynamics with the Macedonians relative to the Corinthians.

Here, there seem to be some who are comparing themselves very favourably to Paul, disparaging his ministry and authority and raising up their own. This is something that

Paul clearly rules out elsewhere in his letters. Paul has a careful theological account of boasting, which negates human pride and the constant ways that people attempt to vaunt themselves over others.

Challenging such a culture was also, we should remember, a recurring theme in Jesus' teaching. Nevertheless, Paul's account of boasting encourages boasting in the Lord. Boasting in the way that the Lord is at work in and through us and in others.

Boasting in the God-given fruit of our labours. Now, this boast, it is very important to remember, is not based upon anything that sets us apart from within ourselves. Rather, it's purely on the basis of the grace of God to us and through us.

Paul's boast in the Lord includes the scope of the ministry that God has graciously granted to him, and the work that God has done through him. This ministry extended to the Corinthians. He is their apostle.

He is the one who brought the gospel to them. They are, as he pointed out earlier in the letter, an epistle of Christ, ministered by Paul and his associates. If Paul and his associates need letters of commendation, that is where they're to be found.

Letters written by Christ himself. As their apostle, the one who brought the gospel to them, he has a priority over later interlopers. He is working in the field that the Lord clearly assigned to him.

Paul isn't someone who builds upon another's foundation, as he points out elsewhere. His opponents, by contrast, are. Paul's hope is that as the Corinthians mature and grow in their faith, the scope of his and his associates' ministry and influence among them will be able to grow.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul quoted Jeremiah chapter 9 verses 23 to 24, and he does so again here. Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.

A question to consider. Paul talks a lot about boasting in his letters, in both positive and negative ways. What are some of the positive ways in which Paul speaks about boasting, and how might we learn to follow Paul's example in this? In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, Paul presents himself as if the jealous father of a young betrothed woman, concerned that she not be seduced away from her espoused partner.

The Corinthian church is betrothed to Christ, the Bridegroom. The theme of Christ as the Bridegroom of the church is one found at many points in the New Testament. It's something we see especially in Ephesians chapter 5 verses 22 to 32.

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

We also see Christ as the bridegroom in the book of John and the book of Revelation. The image of the wedding feast found in the Gospels is also important here too. Paul begins with an allusion to the story of Adam and Eve, and the temptation of Eve by the serpent.

There Adam was charged with guarding the garden, and he should have protected his wife, but he failed to do so. And the guile of the serpent is particularly focused upon here. The serpent deceived Eve with his cunning.

Their thoughts ought to be devoted to Christ, but they might easily be misled by Satan's schemes. The task of Paul as an apostle is to act as a guardian for the bride. There is a vision of Christian ministry here as well.

The Christian minister is a servant of the bridegroom to the bride. He represents the bridegroom to her, protecting her from assault or any satanic wiles that might estrange her affections from the one to whom she is betrothed. Unfortunately, the Corinthians seem far too ready to turn from their bridegroom to another.

You can imagine Paul's distress at this. He is the one who is their father in the faith, and he has directed their love to Christ and bound them to him in the covenant bonds of betrothal. They have been washed as a bride in the waters of baptism, and he has declared the wonders of their bridegroom to them.

But now it seems as if they can be led astray from Christ with great ease and little protest on their part. Presented with a counterfeit form of Jesus, a counterfeit form of the Spirit, and a counterfeit form of the Gospel, they seem to be unable to discern the difference. He started off by telling them to bear with him in a little foolishness.

They bear with a counterfeit Jesus, Spirit and Gospel readily enough, so he is hardly making any great demand of them. Paul characterizes his opponents as super-apostles.

They believe that they are superior to him.

These super-apostles were almost certainly not members of the Twelve. Sometimes the term apostle is used for the wider company of those who saw the risen Christ. Paul also sometimes uses it for persons sent on a mission.

Paul grants that he may not be the most skilled orator. Paul has already spoken of the plainness of his speech with which he proclaimed the Gospel to the Corinthians back in 1 Corinthians 2, verses 1-5. While Paul was not the most compelling speaker Acts 20 tells the story of a young man named Eutychus who sank into a deep sleep when Paul spoke a considerable length, fell out of a window and died, Paul was nonetheless not without wisdom in the truth of Christ.

That much should have been made very apparent to the Corinthians by this point. And even more so as the wisdom shone ever more brightly in contrast to the roughness of the speech in which it was couched. The question of the source of Paul's support while he taught the Corinthians is raised here again as it was back in 1 Corinthians 9. Why had Paul acted seemingly inequitably in this manner? Why had he accepted money from the Macedonians but not from the Corinthians? Was it because he didn't love the Corinthians and didn't want to accept their support? Was their money not good enough for him? Quite the opposite.

If anything Paul robbed the Macedonians so that he could give a special treatment to the Corinthians. The other churches in the region would be able to back him up in this matter too as would God himself. Paul is going to continue to act in the same way.

His consistency undermines the accusations of his opponents and their exalted claims that their own work operates in the same way as Paul's does. Paul previously mockingly called them super apostles and then he spoke about the way that they present a counterfeit Jesus, counterfeit gospel and counterfeit spirit. Now he declares that they are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

Indeed beneath the mask they are actually servants of Satan who like their true master are able to disguise themselves as their opposites. They preach a counterfeit gospel, spirit and counterfeit Jesus as those who are skilled in the deceptions of their father who first deceived Eve in the garden. However, as is the case with such persons, they will ultimately be revealed by their fruits as their works yield a bitter harvest.

Paul adopts a fool's persona for the sake of argument. He is speaking not in the proper way that he should as a Christian and apostle of Christ but with a persona for rhetorical purposes. He is playing the game of the super apostles for the sake of argument for a period of time while steadily subverting it as he proceeds.

His mode of speech is ironic and at the outset he wants them to be very clear of that

fact. Once again he plays on the fact that since they gladly bear with fools and their counterfeit gospels, they should bear with him when he devotes a few sentences to playing the part of the fool. He develops the theme of the Corinthians bearing with the spiritual mistreatment that they have received.

In bearing with a counterfeit Jesus, spirit and gospel, they have borne the worst sort of mistreatment. Paul uses hyperbole to drive the point home. They will bear with being made slaves, being devoured, taken advantage of, with people taking airs with them or being struck in the face.

If Paul is being accused of weakness, in his foolish boasting he declares his shame that he and his apostles simply weren't strong enough to abuse the Corinthians in the way that the super apostles had. The super apostles' strength really showed up Paul's weakness on that point. Paul has condemned the way of those who constantly compare themselves with each other earlier in the letter, but now he does so himself, yet in a way designed to nullify such competitive comparisons, not to play the same game.

His ironic detachment in his foolish speech is really important here. The super apostles may be capitalizing upon their Jewish identity. Paul could readily do that too, should he want to.

Elsewhere in Philippians 3-11 he contrasts putting confidence in the flesh and the way that, although he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, he has jettisoned such confidence for knowing Christ. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.

Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. If the super apostles want to play that Jewish status game, Paul can easily beat them at it. But he has abandoned that in order to gain Christ.

Yet nullifying the super apostles requires temporarily adopting an in-the-flesh persona to close them down. If they claim to be servants of Christ, Paul is that much better. At this juncture he has to make especially clear that he is speaking in the persona of a fool, as a

self-exalting boast in his apostolic service is precisely the sort of thing that the gospel rules out.

He boasts of his far greater toil or labours for Christ. His list of hardships, one of a number in this letter, is a list of ways in which Paul has accounted his life and comfort of little value relative to the message that he bears and the master that he serves. Of course, part of what he has accounted to be of little value is his status, which means that this list has an increasingly paradoxical character.

His endurance through so many trials is proof of his faithfulness to his commission. It's a list of hardships, not of great demonstrations of power or prominence, but of dogged demonstration of faithfulness. The irony of the list will become clearer as we read through it.

The sort of things Paul included would be considered shameful by many. Who boasts of being imprisoned often, of being stoned, or of being beaten at the hands of the Jews? They might boast of being Jews, being beaten at the hands of the Jews? Not so much. This is definitely not the list of someone who wants to make a good showing in the flesh.

However, someone who wishes to be found in Christ, to know the fellowship of his sufferings, might well see that fellowship most in the hardships he endured for Christ, and perhaps especially in those hardships that reveal the world's rejection of him, as it rejected his master before him. The point of all this is to foreground Paul's weakness. Who is weak? And I am not weak.

This is where Paul chiefly finds his boast, in his weakness. This focus of Paul's identity also leads to his special concern for the weak who are caused to fall, a point that Jesus emphasised in his own teaching on a few occasions. The strong wish to set themselves apart from the weak as much as possible.

However, Paul, in foregrounding his weakness, can take a special concern for the weakest and most vulnerable of Christ's sheep. Paul concludes the chapter with one final boast of being let down through a window in the wall of Damascus to deliver him from the king who sought to capture him. That story is not even a story of some great endurance on Paul's part, but of his rejection by the world and the Lord's gracious deliverance of him.

Paul's powerlessness in that situation was the occasion for the Lord's salvation. The subversion of the status-seeking games of the super-apostles then is well underway, but Paul will deliver the finishing blows to it in the next chapter. A question to consider, how might Paul's teaching through his ironic boasting in this chapter challenge the way that we regard ourselves and our status? In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul continues his fool's speech, in which he has adopted a persona in order to beat the so-called super-apostles at their own game.

Throughout, he has made sure to hold this persona at arm's length, ensuring that the Corinthians recognize that he isn't speaking as himself at this point. While engaging in boasting as a fool, Paul has cleverly subverted the boasting of the super-apostles, boasting about the greater sufferings and indignities he has suffered for Christ, things that wouldn't be a cause of boasting for almost anyone else. He has shown that he can best the super-apostles in cause for boasting, while also showing that their supposed grounds for boasting are not the true grounds for boasting at all.

Now he takes this further, to a dangerous point, where he might risk tipping over into actual boasting, as it is harder to establish a clear distance between himself and his fool's speech at this juncture. While Paul is showing that the grounds of the super-apostles' boasting is illegitimate, he is also showing that, if he were a fool, he could outmatch them in such boasting. Paul doesn't avoid such boasting out of fear of losing, but because the boasting is incompatible with Christ.

Having listed a great number of hardships, Paul moves to speak of astonishing degrees of revelation. The super-apostles might boast of their visions, but Paul's visions and revelations greatly exceed theirs. Speaking of these visions more directly in his fool's speech would be unfitting, and would easily seem like actual boasting.

So Paul chooses to relate the vision that he received in the third person, speaking of a man in Christ, while clearly relating his own personal experiences. This actually happened to Paul, and was a clear sign of the great blessing that he received, one that was manifestly far greater than that enjoyed by others. He needs to speak of this with great trepidation, though, because, whether or not he intended it as a boast, it would have the same effect, and would undermine the critique of boasting that he is advancing here.

Paul doesn't go into details about the experience. He casts a veil over much of it. He speaks of himself in the third person.

He doesn't know whether he was in the body or out of it, and he heard things that can't be told. Paul is mostly intentionally tipping his hand here, to reveal cards that he would never actually play, encouraging all of his opponents to fold. He has presumably revealed nothing of this event to the Corinthians prior to this time.

This would have strengthened Paul's point that such boasting was incompatible with faithful Christian service. In all of his time of knowing them, he hadn't mentioned this remarkable vision, precisely because such a vision could only properly be received by a profoundly humble person. We should probably recall Numbers chapter 12 verses 1 to 8 here, where Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses, insinuating that Moses' prominence as the prophetic leader of the Israelites was ego-driven.

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had

married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, Come out you three to the tent of meeting.

And the three of them came out. And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both came forward.

And he said, Hear my words. If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream.

Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth clearly and not in riddles.

And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Moses was the one to whom God revealed himself most fully. He was the faithful and most trusted servant.

Moses' humility may be related to the intensity of the revelation that God gave to him and the intimacy that he enjoyed with the Lord. Extensive revelation, power or authority are huge liabilities and can easily corrupt people. Moses' extreme humility is that which fits him to be the recipient of a unique level of revelation.

If he was not the meekest man in the earth, he would not be suited to have the greatest degree of revelation in the earth. If, for a moment, Moses had thought that the exceptional degree of revelation he had received was about him, he would be in extreme peril of pride. It was because Moses was the meekest of all men that the Lord could reveal himself so fully to him without puffing him up.

Paul doesn't actually express this vision in the form of a boast. He just relates the story as one that he would be able to make a boast about, should he want to do so. Yet, after tipping his hand, he doesn't play any card.

Rather, he puts the cards he has been playing with in his fool's speech down and starts to dismantle the logic of the boasting. He concludes verse 6 by declaring that he refrains from such boasting altogether. He doesn't build his apostolic credentials upon the basis of special revelations and visions, but upon things that the Corinthians had seen in him and heard from him.

From his astonishing heavenly vision, Paul moves to speak of a thorn in the flesh that the Lord had given to him to ensure that he didn't become conceited. This was given by God, but is also described as a messenger of Satan designed to harass him. There's been much speculation concerning the character of this thorn in the flesh.

What exactly is it? The word thorn might refer to a stake upon which someone might become impaled on a battlefield. It seems to be a stratagem designed by Satan to

undermine Paul's ministry. It is both a messenger of Satan, but also something that God permits and wills Paul to suffer in his gracious providence.

Like Job in the Old Testament, Paul is someone that Satan has his eye on and whom he wishes to destroy. By allowing Paul to undergo the testing of Satan, God proves the effectiveness of his work in him. It is probably best not to engage in too much speculation about what this thorn might have been.

Some have suggested loss of eyesight, others epilepsy, others severe headaches or something like that. We should assume that it was some affliction rather than a sinful temptation. A sinful temptation would undermine Paul's point here.

Rather, it is likely similar to the things that Job suffered in Satan's attack upon his body. External hardships and afflictions hadn't done the trick with Paul for Satan, as they had also failed with Job. So Satan struck closer to home.

The actual thing that was the thorn in the flesh isn't the real point. The issue is what Paul learned through it. While the super apostles seem to have emphasised their victories, their revelations, their strengths and their riches, Paul had discovered God's grace and power in the place of his greatest weakness and suffering.

At that point, God was fashioning him to be a fitting bearer of his power by emptying him of all of his own. He prayed three times for the removal of the thorn in the flesh. We should probably remember Christ's own threefold prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup would pass from him before surrendering himself to the Father's will.

Paul is probably conscious of this parallel. He is sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Paul has learned contentment in the sufficiency of God in his weakness.

God's grace is enough. And this is all for the sake of Christ, in whose sufferings he is ultimately sharing. Paul wraps up his fool's discourse.

The Corinthians should have known that Paul was the genuine article. He shouldn't have needed to play the part of the fool to show the Corinthians that he has the marks of a true apostle, and that he is by no means less than the supposed super-apostles. The fruits of his genuine ministry were amply manifested among them, and even in them.

They themselves were epistles of Christ, ministered by Paul and his associates. He had patiently proved himself to them in his ministry among them. Nor had Paul treated the Corinthians any less than any other church.

The one exception to this is what they have come to imagine as a wrong done to them in his not taking support from them. Paul's response to this at the end of verse 13 is suitably sarcastic. A question to consider.

Paul presents his thorn in the flesh as the necessary companion to the wonderful revelations that he received. What are some other biblical examples of God humbling people in order that they might be more powerfully used by him? In the second half of 2 Corinthians chapter 12, and the final chapter of the epistle, Paul speaks of his third visit to Corinth again. His first visit was the one narrated in Acts chapter 18.

The second was the painful visit he wrote of earlier in this epistle. Continuing from his statement in verse 13 about his imagined wronging of the Corinthians in not taking support from them, not granting them the honour of being his patrons, Paul expresses his determination to continue that policy of not taking support in his forthcoming visit. What Paul wants is not the Corinthians' resources, but the Corinthians themselves, their joyful response to his teaching and fellowship with them in the gospel.

He is their father in the faith and it is not the task of offspring to store up support and inheritance for their parents, but vice versa. Paul is clearly not averse to asking for resources from the Corinthians, but not for himself, rather he requests them for the Jerusalem collection. Paul's self-giving service of the Corinthians is entirely willing and not grudging.

It proceeds from his love for them, which is why the strange notion that the superapostles have given the Corinthians that Paul loves them less because he doesn't take support from them is so bewildering to Paul. As he has earlier expressed in this letter, Paul is dismayed by the fact that his love for the Corinthians is not truly requited. In fact, it seems as if a really shameful accusation has been made, a claim that the Jerusalem collection is a duplicitous ruse to take money from the Corinthians, without doing so directly.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the fact that other associates of his were involved in organising the collection. If Paul were defrauding them, these parties must presumably be in on the scheme. Yet Titus, for whom the Corinthians seem to have some genuine affection, and the other parties all behave themselves in the same scrupulously consistent and transparent fashion.

At this point, Paul steps back from his argument. He wishes to address a potential misconception. It might appear to some that his epistle is largely an attempt on Paul's part to defend himself, an epistle driven by his own personal interests.

However, Paul's authority has never been an end in itself, as if Paul were chiefly concerned about some status that he personally enjoyed on account of it. No, Paul's authority exists for the purpose of their protection and edification. These are the things that have concerned Paul throughout.

Paul's worry is that when he comes to them, he may find that they have not set things in order, and that he will have another painful and tense visit, with lingering hostilities from

some of the Corinthians towards him, and another visit in which he will have to cause the Corinthians grief by sharp rebuke. It seems as if Paul has gotten wind of the fact that some of the issues that he addressed in Corinth in 1 Corinthians are still causing problems there, and that some of those who were originally causing the problems haven't repented. If matters of sexual immorality are still causing issues in Corinth, Paul's use of the illustration of a father jealously protecting his betrothed daughter from seduction at the beginning of chapter 11 might well have been a more apt one than we might have originally supposed.

Preparing the Corinthians for his third visit, Paul refers to the ways that matters of contention must be resolved, with the evidence provided by two or three witnesses. There are various ways that the witnesses to which Paul refers might be understood. Some take them to refer to literal witnesses that Paul would summon when he deals with matters more formally upon his return to them.

For others, the witnesses are the visits themselves. Yet others see the witnesses as referring to the warnings that he has given to them, in person and by letter. Behind Paul's statement here we might hear Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 18, verses 15-17.

Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. The logic of two or three witnesses may be at work in Matthew 18's instructions, not only in the accompanying parties in the second confrontation, but also in the two or three confrontations of the sinning brother taken together. The bringing of witnesses does suggest a more formal procedure that Paul is going to adopt.

Matters have escalated. Perhaps Timothy and Titus will speak in Paul's defence. Paul gives his warning that, when he comes, he won't spare the impenitent.

Like those condemned by Matthew 18, they will presumably be removed from fellowship. Some of the Corinthians have sought from Paul a demonstration or proof that Christ is speaking in him. They want to test the veracity of his claimed authority.

Paul treats this less as a questioning of himself, but as a questioning of Christ. Christ has been powerful among them, and the Corinthians should be well aware of this. Paul relates what he has been saying to the weakness and power connection to which he has often returned in the letter.

Christ's own identity was marked by this connection between weakness and power, and it is Christ who both must be determinative for the way that we think about power more generally, and must be the one in whom we situate ourselves. Those who think about power in earthly ways will find it difficult to understand the Christ-shaped ministry of Paul and his associates. The Corinthians have been looking for proof from Paul, but Paul turns things around on them.

The proof of Paul's ministry, as seen in chapter 3 verses 1 to 3, is the Corinthians themselves. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. If the Corinthians are testing Paul, they should turn the spotlight around on themselves.

The evidence of the authority of Christ at work in and through Paul is the Corinthians themselves. If they are looking for proof, then they should look at themselves. The question that they must answer is, is Jesus Christ in you? Paul words the question in a way that presumes a positive answer.

For all their faults and failings, Christ is indeed among them. Whatever unsettling aspects of evidence that throw that judgment into temporary shadow, if Christ is indeed working among them, then there is evidence of Christ at work in and through Paul. Once again, Paul's concern here is not self-justification and self-defense, but the building up of the Corinthians in the truth and in the path of righteousness.

Paul is much less concerned with his own apostolic reputation than he is with the Corinthians' well-being, the health of his children in the faith. Paul is not spoiling for a fight with the Corinthians, or looking for an opportunity to flex his apostolic authority. Rather, he is very glad to appear weak if they are strong in the faith.

As a good father, he does not rejoice in bringing punishment and rebuke. He is entirely uninvested in proving himself tough when it is not in the service of building up his children. It is for this reason that he is writing to them now in such a manner, to avoid a situation where he has to employ a more forceful authority with them.

What he is praying for is their restoration. His authority was given for the sake of building up, not for tearing down, a point he has already made in chapter 10 verse 8. While there may be occasions when tearing down is required, this is not the ordinary intended use of his authority, so he will do whatever he can to avoid the unnecessary employment of it in such a fashion. In Paul's final admonitions to the Corinthians, we might get a sense of those things that he deems most needful for them at this present juncture in time.

He wants them to seek to restore things, their appropriate conduct and their relationship with him. He wants them to be comforted, something that will be achieved as restoration occurs. They should put an end to conflict and dissension, and they should be at peace.

God is the God of love and peace, and these are behaviours characteristic of his presence among us. As he often tells the recipients of his letters, Paul charges the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss, as an expression of the holy unity and

peace that we enjoy in Christ. He conveys the greetings of other saints to them, which would serve to remind them of the fact that there is a wider body of people, of Christians, attending to the matters between Paul and them, and that for the sake of bringing glory to God through their thanksgiving on the Corinthians' account, they should respond appropriately.

Finally, Paul gives a threefold Trinitarian blessing to the Corinthians. Each person of the Trinity is associated with a particular blessing. Grace with the Son, to Lord Jesus Christ, love with God the Father, and fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

We can best understand this with what some theologians have termed the doctrine of appropriation. God's works are indivisible. All of God does all that God does.

The Trinity isn't a division of labour, nor is the grace of the Son a grace that is not at the same time a grace from the Father to us, or the grace communicated to us by the Spirit. The same can be said of the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It is through the Son that the love of the Father is made manifest, and it is the Spirit by whom that love is poured out and personally present in our hearts.

The fellowship of the Spirit is, according to 1 John 1, verse 3, a fellowship that we enjoy with the Father and the Son. The doctrine of appropriation offers a fuller account of how each person of the Trinity can possess in a unique manner what is the common property of all. According to this approach, for instance, by recognising the order of the Trinity, names, qualities or works can be especially attributed to one person, albeit not to the exclusion of the others.

So while fellowship may be something wrought by all of the persons of the Trinity, it is most fittingly associated with the Spirit. A question to consider. How might taking Christ as our model for power change the way that we regard and exercise it?