

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:11-21

Title: The Third Coming of the Apostle

Truth: Even though Paul was an apostle, he was willing to sacrifice himself for the spiritual benefit of the Corinthians.

Date/Location: Sunday 9/6, 13/2026 at FBC (revised from 11/26/2006)

Introduction

In these verses, Paul closes his foolish speech and lays out initial thoughts as to his plan to visit Corinth for a third time.

Paul wraps up the defense he has been offering, in which we see that Paul is not merely defending himself as if he is irked that his name has been run through the mud. His personal reputation is by far secondary to the apostolic office invested in him by Jesus Christ and the gospel message that comes with it. His defense is of the Lord's work in and through him. He has made his whole appeal to the church "before God" and "in Christ" with the purpose to build them up. Defending the apostolic ministry serves to keep them on the straight and narrow path, saving them from being led astray by false teachers. We glean from this that an important aspect of "doing church" is the edification of the saints—that is, to fortify, build up, and strengthen in apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42).

I. The Signs of an Apostle, v. 11-13

Paul now closes his "fool's speech." He says that he made a fool of himself because he felt so awkward talking about himself, particularly in light of 10:12. However, it was necessary for him to do this to rescue the Corinthians from false teaching and defend apostolic doctrine—not just to defend Paul's personal honor. They drove Paul to it but instead ought to have given him high marks and resisted the false apostles. There are three reasons why they should have stood up for Paul instead of folding.

A. He is no Less than the So-Called Super-Apostles, v. 11.

One way to understand the text is that the "chief apostles" refers to the apostolic pillars in the church such as Peter and John. But in 11:5, we saw that a similar phrase was sandwiched in a context concerning false apostles—those who had infiltrated the

Corinthian church—and we suggested that this phrase “super apostles” was actually Paul’s way of sarcastically comparing himself to them. Paul is saying they don’t have anything on him—he has the revelatory knowledge (11:6), the ethnic background (11:22), the resume of trials (11:23-33), the revelations (12:1-6), and, we will see next, the gift of doing miracles (12:12).

Even though this is true, Paul admits that he is actually nothing. His personal merit is not what brought him to the point where he is—that is due to God’s work. Paul said that he was the least of the real apostles (1 Cor. 15:8-10), that he was the least of the saints (Eph. 3:8), and that he was the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). But he acknowledged God’s work in him. Thus, he avoided seeing himself as a total worm because of his calling from God. We are nothing in one sense, but our position in Christ and the blessed things He has done for us and to us keep us from complete self-despair. So, we should avoid both extremes: arrogance and worm-theology.

Interestingly, Paul was not inferior to the super-apostles, although at the same time he was nothing. The resolution to the “I am nothing, but I am not inferior” paradox is God’s work in him.

B. God Worked the Signs of an Apostle Through Paul, v. 12.

The word *signs* refers to miracles done by Paul (Acts 19:11). A miracle is a direct intervention of God into history, time, nature, etc. Normally, God works providentially through secondary means, in accordance with what we observe to be the laws of nature. However, sometimes God steps in directly to do something special (creation, the Noahic flood, the miracles in Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of manna, the resurrection of Jesus, regeneration, etc.) The Bible *assumes* that God can work miracles in the world. The worldly presupposition against the supernatural has no place in the Christian’s thinking. God *is* able to intervene directly in the world!

The term apostle is used in a couple of ways in the Bible. The most important is the technical sense of a divinely chosen representative of Jesus who delivered foundational revelation to the church. Other times, *apostle* refers to a representative of a church. Note the following qualifications for the technical

office of apostleship. They had to be met for one to be considered a technical apostle.

1. Called by Jesus Christ (Acts 9:3-9, Rom 1:1, 1 Cor. 1:1);
2. Witness of the public ministry and resurrection of Christ (Acts 11:22);
3. Working the miraculous signs of an apostle (here).

There is no one beyond the 12 apostles and Paul who can fit those qualifications.

Paul considers the miracles God wrought through him from three angles.

1. The “sign angle” refers to those things that authenticate (cf. Heb. 2:3-4). They point to something.
2. They are wonders that which evoke awe in the observer.
3. They are mighty deeds which display divine power.

The three angles are these: authentication, amazement, and supernatural power. They authenticate the messenger, they cause wonder in the audience, and they point to God.

They are sufficiently uncommon to be effective signs: if everyone did them, they would be normal! Miracle workers are actually quite rare in Biblical history—Moses, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus, and the apostles, and that is about it, over thousands of years of history. God does not do miracles like these all over the place.

It was God who did these miracles through Paul. See Acts 15:12 and 19:11. Luke does not mention many of the miracles, but he does mention some, about half of which happened *after* 2 Corinthians was written.

Blindness, Acts 13:11

Exorcism, 16:18

Resurrection, 20:9-12

Heal lame man, 14:8-11

General healing, 19:11-12

Snake bit survival, 28:3-6

Heal Publius and others, 28:8-9

Notice Paul says that the miracles were done “with all perseverance.” This means that God worked through Paul who persevered through weakness and affliction. He did not quit.

C. His Refusal of Support Does not Undermine His Apostleship, v. 13

Paul’s refusal to take support was, for some reason, a problem throughout his relationship with the church. After a proper explanation, though, it should not have been a continuing sore spot. Paul even sarcastically asks the church to forgive him for not taking their money (and, as he said before, not abusing them)—this was the only way he treated them “worse” than other churches.

Even the sarcasm was for an edifying purpose: to make sure they knew that it did not take away from Paul’s apostolic status. Their attitude about the finances, when compared to the apostolic signs and the fact that Paul was their spiritual father, amounted to nothing more than nitpicking. It was insignificant. It might have been connected to some important cultural practice or tradition, but notwithstanding, it was unimportant.

The Corinthians were not inferior to other churches at all. Paul had the same financial policy with all of them *when he was actively ministering to them—and perhaps long after if money was a source of contention like in Corinth*. Paul worked miracles, likely at all of the churches. With apostolic teaching and apostolic sign miracles worked in their midst, they could not claim that they were somehow inferior to others.

D. Paul has two main credentials. One is weakness, affliction and persecution. The other is God-wrought miracles. Strength in weakness. This is like Jesus, who did many miracles, and taught powerfully. But He was crucified in weakness.

II. Paul’s Upcoming Third Visit, vv. 14-18

Now Paul moves from the foolish speech to straightforward talk to further edify the church. His first apostolic visit was in Acts 18 at the planting of the church; the second was the painful visit which happened during the three years in Ephesus in Acts 19-20. Now,

Paul is planning his third visit—a visit he was earlier unable to make happen (2 Cor. 1:15-24).

- A. Paul will not be a burden, v. 14. He resolved to continue his policy of not taking support. It was a good policy, so he planned to stick with it regardless of criticism. It had become a mark distinguishing his ministry from that of the false apostles and he wants to maintain that distinction. Additionally, he will continue to refuse support because he is not interested in their possessions (yours), but **rather in their souls and their love** (“but you” and see v. 15’s “your souls” — key idea to the passage). Paul is not interested in the Corinthians’ money, but in *them*. He is passionate about winning them for God, that they would be pure for Christ like a bride for her husband. Paul’s ministry is not about Paul; it is about *them*.

Paul gives a general principle as the reason why he would not burden them. It is a good and timeless principle and should have soothed any hurt feelings the Corinthians had over the matter. The principle is this: children do not sacrifice for the parents, but parents for the children. Children represent the church in its early development; the parent represents Paul. Paul works in order to care for his spiritual children.

This principle must be applied at the right time, namely when the parents are taking care of *children*, that is, dependents, normally not of age. While kids are kids, they need parental support. Parents do not want their children’s money! 1 Tim. 5:4-8 shows that there is another time in life when (adult) children must care for their parents. 1 Cor. 9:4-15 shows that the apostle (and today the pastor and evangelist) is due support from the church. The key is the timing of the application: infants and children do not support their parents, but the parents support them. As time goes on, adult children support themselves, and then later when the parents are advanced in age, the now adult offspring support their parents! Likewise, new churches cannot support themselves or a pastor, but when they grow up, they should be supporting their pastor as well as missionaries trying to raise new children (believers, churches).

- B. Paul will spend and be spent for them, v. 15. Despite the fact that the Corinthians were not returning Paul's love (6:12-13), he would continue to work on their behalf until he could not do any more. He would give of his means and of his strength to serve them. This is the key to the section: **Paul sacrifices for their spiritual benefit.**

This verse contains a good lesson for me (and you): we can "spend" ourselves for many things, but here the right cause is "for souls." We must not spend all our energy on useless things. Another lesson here is that we can spend ourselves for people that do not return thanks or love in kind. --- **End of 9/6/2026 sermon** ---

- C. Paul did not take advantage of them, vv. 16-18. Paul reiterates that he was not a burden to the Corinthians. But then sarcastically, he says he netted the Corinthians by his great cleverness. Perhaps he is drawing their attention to a false charge made against him, like this: "Paul, you did not take our money before, and pretended to be so upright, but that was just a front. Your involvement in the offering proves that you are going to get money through your representatives. You are going to sneak it out the back door!"

Paul refutes that argument by appealing to the facts. He did not cheat them personally, nor through anyone that he sent to them. Both he and Titus as well as "our brother" all had the same attitude and behavior. They were morally pure of the charges leveled against them. Even more importantly, recall 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 where Paul told them to collect the offering *before* he came, and to appoint people to oversee the gift on the way to Jerusalem. Those people would be responsible for making doubly sure that Paul or other people did not steal the offering. There was no possible way that he could be sneaking money.

III. Hesitancy About the Visit, v. 19-21

- A. The section begins by critiquing a wrong idea that some may have had that Paul was defending himself to them, as if they were his judges. Paul emphasizes that he is not defending himself as if the Corinthians were his judges. Paul was speaking this way not to defend himself but to edify the church by saving them from errant

teaching. He calls God as witness. *God* is judge, and Paul was concerned for them, not himself.

B. Paul is hesitant to go to Corinth again. Wouldn't you be hesitant if you had his job? Imagine the tension in the situation—the church has had problems for a long time, the apostle Paul has written four times, traveled there twice, and things are still in rough shape. Who wants to deal with this sort of thing? But some people have to. There are two specific reasons that Paul gives as to why he is hesitant to come.

C. Paul fears he will not find the Corinthians in acceptable moral shape, v. 20-21

The first reason Paul is hesitant to come is that the church is in dire condition, and he would rather not see that. The list in verse 20 contains all kinds of “people problems” not fitting for a church:

- contentions – strife, discord, quarrels (Rom. 1:29, 1 Cor. 3:3)
- jealousies – party strife, factionalism (Acts 5:17, James 3:14-16)
- outbursts of wrath – anger, rage (Rom. 2:8, Gal. 5:20)
- selfish ambitions – rivalry, strife, factions (Rom. 2:8, Gal. 5:20 has all of these first four items, Phil. 1:17)
- backbitings – evil speech, slander, defamation (1 Peter 2:1)
- whisperings – gossip, talebearing
- conceits – puffed up, pride, arrogance
- tumults – disturbances, disorder, unruliness, unrest (1 Cor. 14:33, James 3:16)

I pray to God that we do not have these things in our church. And I hope you care about these kinds of sins in your life and with God's help you are rooting them out for the glory of God. But I wonder if sometimes we even *recognize* when we are doing some of these things. Outbursts of wrath are easy to spot, but if we are the one doing them, we can pass them off as “righteous anger” or “justified because of the situation.” Gossip, selfish ambitions, jealousies, and are subtler and sneakier. Think about it for a minute.

Verse 21 lists mainly sexual sins which were common around Corinth. They are:

- uncleanness – moral corruption (Matt. 23:27, Rom. 1:24, Rom. 6:19, Gal. 5:19)
- fornication – unchastity, prostitution, immorality, any unlawful sexual intercourse (Acts 15:20, 1 Cor. 6:13)
- lewdness – licentiousness, debauchery, sensuality (Rom. 13:13, 2 Peter 2:18)

Interleaved between and after the first and second lists are three phrases that describe this sinful behavior.

1. First, these people had sinned before. They sinned previously and *remained* in a sinful lifestyle despite Paul's warnings.
 2. Second, they did not repent. That is, they did not change their mind with regard to sin, with the concomitant change of behavior that comes from a true change of heart. They felt no remorse, and were not converted away from that behavior.
 3. Third, they practiced the sins. These were not just one-time indiscretions. The whole sentence emphasizes how they *lived* in sin. They indulged themselves in sin. Granted the perpetrators were just a subset of the Corinthian church—but it is a horrible situation nevertheless.
- D. A genuine Christian has changed his or her mind with respect to sin (Acts 11:18, 17:30, 20:21, 26:20) and does not want to live that way anymore. Furthermore, a true believer does not *practice* or *indulge in* unrighteousness (1 John 3:6-10). Remember 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21: people who practice such things are simply giving evidence that they are not Christians. There was a very real possibility that some Corinthians had professed faith but were still unsaved.

May I appeal to you directly? Are you living a life of open evil or secret wickedness? Have you run away from God—in your heart? Isaiah 55:7 says that if you forsake your evil ways and return to the Lord, God will have mercy on you and will pardon you. He can do this because Jesus took upon Himself the demerit of your sin. In this way, God's pardon is real and effective for even the most wicked person. Will you receive Him? His work and person is the

only way we can be right with God or be maintained in that right standing.

- E. The second reason Paul was hesitant to come to Corinth was that the Corinthians were not going to like how Paul will have to be with them. The serious problems in the church would cause Paul to be humiliated and ashamed, not to mention demand that he take drastic steps to correct. If only they would repent now, all this trouble could be avoided. And that is what sin does. It causes you trouble, either now or later, or both.

Sin should always have the effect on us that it causes us shame and grief—whether in our own lives or in those we care about. If we do not care very much about evil in us, or in others, or about what it does to people, what does that say about our character? We know this much at least—we are not much like the apostle Paul. I would also venture to say that we are not as much like Jesus as we should be. He wept over the iniquity of His people (Luke 19:41). He wept at the sin-cursed condition of people (John 11:35).

Further, Paul expected that he would mourn over them, that is, he would grieve and be very sad when he saw firsthand the conditions there. Mourning often is associated with death, and without a doubt one of his fears is that some who are attached to the church are actually spiritually dead. And if they are genuine followers of Christ, people who live in the kinds of behaviors listed above are in a bad place. Much sanctification is needed. Paul might have to bring a rod of discipline (1 Cor. 4:21) and this would be far more unpleasant than a gentle visit with saints who have repented.

Conclusion

Notice the apostle's humble self-evaluation despite all these credentials of apostolic authority: "I am nothing." Despite much suffering and persecution, many visions and a visit to Heaven, and Christ working in Him to strengthen him in the face of the thorn in the flesh, and the miraculous signs, he considered himself nothing. The thorn had produced its intended effect, to keep him humble. May we be humble even if we do not have a thorn in the flesh.

Notice how Paul downplays the vision and the signs of an apostle.

Those sorts of things captivate people today, but they are not the focus. The focus is God's power in the midst of human weakness along with sacrifice for the edification of the church.

God calls us to serve others, love others, and even to suffer for the gospel. Like Paul, we should work toward the spiritual benefit of others. Their edification in the faith should be our concern.

Remember: "for your souls."

MAP

P.S. Let Me Remind You of Something

2 Cor. 4:7-14 reminds us of our earthen vessel status, our weakness, and yet also the strength of God. 2 Corinthians 12 told us of Paul's humbling thorn in the flesh. 2 Cor. 11 tells us of Paul's physical and spiritual suffering for Christ. Yet Paul gloried in this weakness because that very thing was what permitted God's power to be most wonderfully displayed. Like a diamond on a backdrop of a black cloth shines all the more, so the power of God shines brightest when it is operating in a vessel of weakness. God's power sustains us and keeps our spirits up, our speech graceful, our faith persevering, our prayers flowing, our worship singing, and our service ongoing as we are able.

Many of our assembly have bodily weakness right now. I'm thinking of at least four people with significant chronic issues (Steve, Becky, Sonya, Noreen). And some with presently less severe issues but that could turn deadly. I want to encourage you if you are a believer in Jesus, our God *will* carry you through.

Many of us are beset with spiritual weaknesses that we know about; and many have similar weaknesses that we do not yet realize. Maybe we walk at a distance from God or treat His things as commonplace, His worship with lightness, His message with indifference. How can we do this? Yet God will see to it that by His grace to propel us through these weaknesses as well. I want to exhort you to jump on board with what God is doing. Soak up the joy of worshipping together our great God, of living for Him in the midst of a dark world. It is a great, great privilege.