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Father of Mercies, God of All Comfort

There is nothing on earth that is reliable. Our jobs may end tomorrow; our spouses may pack up and leave next week. The preacher we thought so highly of may prove to be an adulterer; the financial security we spent decades building may be wiped out in five minutes. In times of crisis, we may even fail ourselves.

The first-century church knew disappointment too. 2 Corinthians 1 paints a picture of a church that is bitterly disappointed because Paul did not come to them when he said he would. They thought he let them down. In this opening portion of Paul's reply, he explains his conduct, but, more importantly, directs the Corinthian church to someone who will not disappoint them—God.

This is a lesson that we ought to learn today. Everything else in life can be faithless, but God is always faithful. Before the world was even founded, He planned to bring His children to eternal life with Him in heaven, and He will not forget us or fail us. He is most present when we need Him most. No burden is too great for God's strength; no sorrow is too deep for His compassion. No matter what trials come upon us, those trials can be a blessing if we learn to lean on Him.

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

2. What does the description of God in 2 Corinthians 1:3 tell us about the Christian walk?

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7. What events may Paul be describing in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10? Consider Acts 19:23-41 in your answer.

8. In 2 Corinthians 1:10-11, to what two things does Paul credit his deliverance? How should Paul's deliverance change our perspective on those two things?

2 Corinthians 1:12-24

9. Consider the context of 2 Corinthians 1. What accusation is Paul refuting in 2 Corinthians 1:12? How does this explain what he says in the rest of the chapter?

10. How delicately does Paul deal with his Corinthian accusers in 2 Corinthians 1:13-14? What, if anything, should we learn from this?

10. What course of conduct does Paul urge upon the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5? Why? How important is this conduct to our spiritual lives? How do we need to practice it?

11. What does Paul pray for in 2 Corinthians 13:7-8? Why is this unusual? What attitude does this prayer reveal in Paul? How can we adopt it today?

12. What prayer of Paul's do we see revealed in 2 Corinthians 13:9? What does this mean? How can we seek it today?

13. How does Paul characterize his authority in 2 Corinthians 13:10? How are Paul's actions an expression of this kind of authority? What can this teach us today?

14. What can we learn about God from 2 Corinthians 13:14? Why?

6. What fear does Paul express in 2 Corinthians 12:20? Is Paul likely to be responsible for his fears coming to pass? What does this tell us?

7. According to 2 Corinthians 12:21, what does Paul fear concerning God? In what way would this fear come to pass? What should we learn from this?

2 Corinthians 13:1-14

8. What does Paul tell us about his plans in 2 Corinthians 13:1-2? Does Paul expect this to be a happy reunion? What can we learn from Paul's attitude?

9. What does 2 Corinthians 12:3-4 say the Corinthians are looking for? Are they likely to be happy when they find it? How will it be revealed to them?

11. According to 2 Corinthians 1:15-17, what were Paul's original travel plans with respect to the Corinthians?

12. Look at Acts 20:1-6. What did Paul actually do? 2 Corinthians 2:1, 12-13; 7:5-6; and 13:1 may also help.

13. How closely does this travel comparison enable us to pin down the time when 2 Corinthians was written? When was it written? Why is this important?

14. What divine work does Paul describe in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22? Why is this description significant?

15. According to 2 Corinthians 1:23-24, why didn't Paul come again to Corinth?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Triumph in Christ

Not everything about being a Christian is fun. God commands us to love and care about one another, but when our brethren destroy themselves with sin, the very love we feel for them can become a source of pain for us. Sometimes, when many of those we love turn away from God, we wonder whether we wouldn't be better off starting our own church of one on a nice, uninhabited desert island.

Paul would have recognized this feeling of sorrow at the sin of others. Just before the writing of 2 Corinthians, he has had a showdown with one of the most troublesome members of the church in Corinth, a church he had founded. This member has been so violent in his rejection of Paul's teaching that he has actually sinned. Paul has left Corinth with the problem unresolved, but his sorrow for the Corinthians has gnawed at his heart wherever he goes.

Paul's message in 2 Corinthians 2, though, is not one of discouragement. It's one of perspective, a perspective that we need to share. In the spiritual wars we fight, there are victories as well as defeats. It's just that the defeats are messier than the victories and draw more attention. God is the one who's in charge, not us, and His vantage point is much better than ours. Our job isn't to worry about things for Him. It's to fight on in His service and allow Him to lead us to triumph in Christ.

2 Corinthians 2:1-11

1. What relation does the first part of 2 Corinthians 2 bear to the last part of 2 Corinthians 1? Why is this important?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Twelve

2. In 2 Corinthians 12:12, what things does Paul say will accompany the true apostle? What application can we make from this today?
3. In 2 Corinthians 12:14-18, Paul makes a number of arguments about why it was actually a good thing for him not to take money from the Corinthians while he was there. What are they?
4. What can we learn from 2 Corinthians 12:16 about what the Corinthians were saying about Paul? Does this remind you of any incidents from the life of Christ? What can we learn from this?
5. What reasons does Paul give for his defense in 2 Corinthians 12:19? How do these reasons fit in with what Paul has been saying?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Test Yourself!

Satan is a guy who is more interested in what he accomplishes than the means he uses. He is deeply, passionately committed to seeing every last one of us in hell, and he will do anything he can to get us there. Despite this indifference, there are some tools we see him using over and over again, simply because they work. One of his favorites is convincing the evil that they're actually good.

We see this idea at work in every walk of life. It's evident in the murderer on death row who claims with complete sincerity that he doesn't belong there, but it's equally obvious in the deacon who explains away the ugliness of his pornography addiction by pointing to all the "righteous" things he does for God. None of us want to believe we're evil. As a result, when Satan begins to tell us why our sin doesn't matter, or why it really isn't a sin, we're eager to believe him. Our faith in our own righteousness remains steady even as our souls drift farther and farther off course.

There's only one cure for this disease. As Paul says, we must test ourselves to see if we are in the faith. In order for this process to work, we must know where we stand, know where God's word says we need to be, and be brutally honest with ourselves about how we measure up. The harsh light of truth may be unflattering, but only it can destroy the vile things that grow in darkness.

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

1. How does Paul say the Corinthians should have received him in 2 Corinthians 12:11? Why? What lesson can we take from this?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Two

2. When did the "coming in sorrow" described in 2 Corinthians 2:1 take place?
3. As far as you can tell, what were the contents of the "letter of tears" Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 1? What was Paul's purpose in writing this letter? What should we learn from Paul in this?
4. What seems to be the basic course of events described in this section? Does it seem similar to or different from something that might happen today? Why is this important?
5. What advice does Paul give the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2:7-8? How applicable is this to us today?

6. In 2 Corinthians 2:9, what other motive does Paul give for his writing? Why is this significant?

7. What consequence does Paul attribute to his forgiveness in 2 Corinthians 2:11? When can this be important to us today?

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:3

8. According to the chronology we've been constructing, when did 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 happen?

9. What contrasting frames of mind are obvious in Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:13 and 2 Corinthians 2:14? What happened in between? What can we learn from this?

10. How extraordinary does Paul consider this experience? What does this tell us about leaders in charismatic churches who claim to be in heaven talking to Jesus every week?

11. According to 2 Corinthians 12:7, what happened to Paul because of his revelation? Does this seem fair? What can we learn from this?

12. How did Paul deal with his affliction in 2 Corinthians 12:8? Was there anything wrong with this response? Did Jesus give Paul what he wanted? Why is this significant?

13. How did the Lord reply to Paul's prayer in 2 Corinthians 12:9? What should we take from this reply?

14. How does this story give us insight into Paul's attitude, especially in light of all he's written in both Corinthian letters?

6. What further burden does Paul describe in 2 Corinthians 11:28-29? What does this tell us about what our concern for our brethren ought to be?

7. To what incident does Paul refer in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33? Where else is it found? How does this double report reinforce our certainty in the authenticity of the Bible?

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

8. Who is the "man in Christ" whom Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12:1-6? How does this fit with his statement in 2 Corinthians 11:5?

9. What is the "third heaven" to which Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 12:2?

10. What two fragrances does Paul describe in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16? Why would he create such different reactions in two different groups of people? What should this tell us?

11. How does Paul describe his adequacy to bear such an important message in 2 Corinthians 2:16? What should we learn from this?

12. What two contrasting reasons for preaching the gospel does Paul give in 2 Corinthians 2:17? Are these two reasons still present today? How should they govern our conduct?

13. What does Paul's comment in 2 Corinthians 3:1 tell us about the way that some of the Corinthians were acting? What made their position ridiculous?

14. What does Paul mean in 2 Corinthians 3:3 when he says that the Corinthians are a letter of Christ? Consider Jeremiah 31:33 in your answer. How is this applicable to us today?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Confidence Through Christ

There is nothing more daunting to us than the prospect of having to make it to heaven by ourselves. Sure, we all recognize the concept of grace in our lives, but too often, we only nod in the direction of the cross and then grimly set out to fight our spiritual battles unaided. We look at where we need to be and cry out "God, how can you expect me to do this?!"

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3 show that he too has faced this deep-seated realization of his own inadequacy. Paul recognizes, though, that his service isn't about his adequacy. It's about God's adequacy. God is the one who has made him a servant of a new covenant, a covenant so wonderful that it is even more glorious than the Law of Moses. God is the one whose promises give him the boldness to speak plainly of the Lord, to see Him and be transformed by Him. God through Paul can do all of the things that Paul can't.

Paul's confidence through Christ toward God is the same confidence that we can have today. God hasn't changed any, and He can still use and transform us in ways we can't even imagine. Satan is very good at digging pits and heaping up barriers in our path, but it doesn't matter how formidable those obstacles appear if we are truly trusting in God. We can look at them and smile. We can look at them and say, "I can't, but God can."

2 Corinthians 3:4-11

1. Considering the previous context, why does Paul bring up confidence in 2 Corinthians 3:4? What can we take from this?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Eleven

2. In what way is Paul's language in 2 Corinthians 11:18-21 ironic? What message is he trying to convey to the Corinthians?
3. What do you think of Paul's spiritual resume in 2 Corinthians 11:22-29? What impact is it likely to have on a church that is too concerned about such things?
4. If we turn our attention to the book of Acts, how many of these incidents do we see recorded by Luke (remember also that 2 Corinthians was written in the time frame of Acts 21)? What makes this both surprising and inspiring?
5. How does this resume reflect a life lived in accordance with spiritual wisdom? What can we learn from this?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

My Grace Is Sufficient

Throughout his entire gospel career, Paul has been ferociously indifferent to suffering. Poverty, shipwrecks, and persecutions alike don't appear to faze him. His mind has become so conformed to the mind of Christ that ordinary, trivial concerns don't register.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, though, we read the story of the trial that finally got through to Paul. Because of a great revelation that he had received from God, God also allowed Satan to visit him. Paul hated this thorn in the flesh and prayed repeatedly that it be removed. However, the prayers of this great, godly man for something he had the right to ask were not answered in the way that Paul wanted. I'm not going to remove this problem for you, Jesus told him. You need to learn to be weak. You need to learn to trust in Me instead. And Paul did.

Are we where Paul was? It's easy to mouth pious phrases about trusting in God when the sun is shining and our life is wonderful. It becomes a lot harder when we face a problem we can't handle, we ask God to get rid of it. . . and He doesn't. What do we do then? Do we blame God, or do we listen to the message of grace that is clearest in our sufferings? Our lives aren't about what happens to us on earth. They're about faith in God, who will surely perform all that He has promised.

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

1. What is Paul trying to say in 2 Corinthians 11:16-17? What attitude from others might have led him to speak in this way? Does this sound like anything we've seen before?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Three

2. According to 2 Corinthians 3:5, what is the source of the adequacy upon which Paul relies? How significant is this concept to us today? Why?
3. Some people will take 2 Corinthians 3:6 and use it to justify why they follow "the spirit, not the letter" of the Bible. Is this what Paul is talking about? If not, what is he actually discussing?
4. What is the "ministry of death" described in 2 Corinthians 3:7? How is it presented? Why is this important to Paul's argument?
5. What statement does Paul make about the "ministry of the Spirit" in 2 Corinthians 3:8-9? Why? What does this have to do with Paul? What does it have to do with us?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Three

6. According to 2 Corinthians 3:10, what is the current glory of "what had glory"? Why? Why is this significant?

7. In 2 Corinthians 3:11, Paul describes two things, "that which fades away" and "that which remains." What are they? Why is the language here important?

2 Corinthians 3:12-18

8. What is the hope that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 3:12? What two things does it cause? Why is this important?

9. What event does 2 Corinthians 3:13 describe? Exodus 34:33-35 may help.

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Ten

10. To what incident does 2 Corinthians 11:9 refer? Consider Philip-
pians 4:15-16 in your answer. How does this help confirm the
authenticity of Scripture?

11. What reason does Paul give for his boasting in 2 Corinthians 11:9
-10? What can we take from this?

12. As per 2 Corinthians 11:12, what does Paul hope to accomplish
with his boasting? Is there an application in this for us?

13. According to 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, what does Paul think of
these other teachers? Whom does he say they serve? What
should we learn from this?

14. Without considering what Paul is talking about, does Paul's lan-
guage seem overly strong? Does he seem to be overreacting
when we consider his topic? What does this teach us?

6. How does Paul describe himself in 2 Corinthians 11:5? What can we infer from this? Why is it important?

7. In 2 Corinthians 11:6, Paul addresses another criticism that the Corinthians have leveled against him. How does he address it? What should we take from this?

2 Corinthians 11:7-15

8. According to 2 Corinthians 11:7-8, what has Paul done for support when with the Corinthians? How have some used this to accuse Paul? How does Paul respond?

9. As per 2 Corinthians 11:9, why did Paul make this choice with respect to the Corinthians? What attitude does this reflect?

10. What is the veil described in 2 Corinthians 3:14-15? Why is this important?

11. According to 2 Corinthians 3:16, what happens to this veil when a person turns to the Lord? What event does this describe? What makes this significant?

12. What is the mirror Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 3:18? 1 Corinthians 13:12 may help. Why is this useful to our understanding of the Bible?

13. When Paul describes himself and the Corinthians as being changed "from glory to glory," what is he talking about? Don't forget the context! Why is this important?

14. 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes a transformation. What will be the final result of this transformation? How does this fit with our understanding of other passages?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

The Things Which Are Not Seen

The better we understand the gospel, the more it will change us. In the first stages of spiritual growth, we depart from the world a little bit. We fight against the sins we used to love, and we deal with pointed questions from our family and friends. As we continue to grow, the things that were so dear to us become less and less important. We used to try to change our actions; now, we try to change our hearts, and as those hearts change, our actions change again in ways we would never have foreseen.

Paul's writing represents another stage in the Christian growth process. He lives a life that the world would only call miserable. By his own admission, he is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and constantly delivered over to death. I've known dogs with easier lives than the apostle Paul.

The thing is, Paul wouldn't have it any other way. He now shares in the mind of Christ so completely that even his physical well-being is a matter of unconcern. He has a gospel to preach and glory to claim, and to him, that's what matters. We need to transform our thinking in the same way. Earthly joys may be legitimate or sinful, but they are all unimportant. The things we cannot see or touch or taste are the things that are truly significant. Let's live like it.

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

1. What is the ministry Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 4:1?

2. What is Paul talking about when he discusses "boasting within his measure" in 2 Corinthians 10:13-15? Why would good behavior on the Corinthians' part give him further cause to boast?

3. What does Paul tell us in 2 Corinthians 10:17? What does this mean? How can we apply this concept in our lives today?

4. Describe the "godly jealousy" that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3. What does Paul want? What does Paul fear? How should we deal with this concept?

5. What does Paul portray some other teachers as doing in 2 Corinthians 11:4? How are the Corinthians taking this? Is this a good thing? What should we learn from this?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

A Godly Jealousy

The Greek word zelos is translated a number of different ways in our Bibles. Sometimes it is merely transliterated into our word "zeal," which is derived from it. Other times, it merely signifies desire; still others, it is translated as "jealousy". Normally, jealousy is cast in a negative light. It is the emotion that caused the patriarchs to plot to murder Joseph and moved the Jews to persecute Paul. It is the anger that comes over us when the love we desire is given to another.

In 2 Corinthians 10-11, we see a different kind of jealousy in operation. Paul describes himself as being jealous on behalf of the Corinthians because they have begun to listen to other teachers. However, this jealousy is not something that Paul feels for his own sake. Instead, he fears that those other teachers will lead the Corinthians away not just from him, but also from Christ.

We need to learn this godly jealousy with respect to those whom we love. If we know Christ, we ought to be deeply concerned about whether our families, our friends, and our brethren in Christ listen to us or not. If we have the truth, we shouldn't be okay with it when those we care about listen to error. We need to be jealous because it's not just our opinions that are at stake. It's their souls.

2 Corinthians 10:12-11:6

1. What action does Paul describe in 2 Corinthians 10:12? How does he characterize it? What should we take from this?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Four

2. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:1 that he does not lose heart as he received mercy. What is the connection between these two things? Why is this important?
3. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, what are the "things hidden because of shame"? Do these things still pose a problem for us today? How do we deal with them?
4. In the same verse, through what action did Paul renounce the shameful things? Why is this important to Christians today?
5. What does 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 tell us about Paul's success in teaching the gospel? If some failed to learn, why did they fail? What should we learn from this today?

6. According to 2 Corinthians 4:4-5, whose gospel was Paul preaching? When people refused to see the gospel, whom were they rejecting? Why do we need to recognize this?

7. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul compares two lights. What are they? What can we learn from this comparison?

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

8. According to 2 Corinthians 4:7, where is the treasure of the gospel contained? Why is this true? What can we learn from this?

9. Through the context of 2 Corinthians 4:8-12, Paul describes some of the difficulties he has faced. What are they? How does Paul respond to these difficulties? Why?

10. When Paul mentions those who regard him as though he walked according to the flesh in 2 Corinthians 10:2, what attitude is he talking about? Why would dealing with such people require particular boldness? What can we take from this?

11. In 2 Corinthians 10:4-6, what do we learn about Christian warfare? What makes this important to us?

12. What attitude does Paul describe in 2 Corinthians 10:7? What did the Corinthians need to understand? What do we need to understand?

13. What idea does Paul mean to convey in 2 Corinthians 10:8-9? In what way could he be put to shame?

14. Once again, is the description of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:10 an accurate one? How do we know? What is Paul trying to say?

6. In 2 Corinthians 9:11-14, what other results does Paul say he hopes the Corinthians' giving will produce? How often do we think about these things? How important are they?

7. Why might Paul be particularly concerned that the gifts of the Corinthians produce this result? Consider Romans 15:25-31 in your answer.

2 Corinthians 10:1-11

8. 2 Corinthians 10:1 starts with another "Now". What context shift does this indicate? Why is it important for us to recognize such things?

9. Is Paul's self-assessment in 2 Corinthians 10:1 an ironic one? What is Paul actually saying? What do we learn about the Corinthians from this?

10. In 2 Corinthians 4:11, Paul says that the life of Jesus was manifested in his flesh. In what senses is this true? What should we learn from this?

11. To what motive does Paul attribute his speaking in 2 Corinthians 4:13-15? In what ways is this motive responsible for Paul's behavior? What should we learn from this?

12. In 2 Corinthians 4:16, Paul states that his inner man is being renewed daily. What is he talking about? How does this happen? How can we experience this same inner renewal?

13. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul contrasts two things. What are they? What does Paul say about them? What can we learn from this?

14. 2 Corinthians 4:18 contrasts two ways of looking at life. What does each one see? What does this difference in perception cause?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Therefore All Died

In no other context do we deal as lightly with the word "death" as in the Bible. When we speak of the death of a friend or family member, it's a traumatic event that changes our lives for months or years. By contrast, when we encounter the idea of death to self and sin in the Bible, too often, it's a spiritual beach ball. We give mental assent to the idea and bat it around in Sunday morning classes, but we don't really think about what it means.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 should cause us to think differently. It describes the inevitable result when we genuinely confront the cross. In one stunning, spectacular act of love, Jesus gave Himself to the death that we had earned. Once we recognize that, we cannot get around it. We literally owe our souls to Him, and from there, the rest of our lives must follow as inexorably as a geometry proof. Jesus died for me. I must die for Him. I am no longer mine. I am His, and there is no other choice.

The rest of the chapter describes Paul's continuing death. Controlled by the love of Christ, he devotes himself to teaching the Corinthians and whomever else will listen. That's what Jesus wants. Paul groans against life itself, longing to die so he can go to heaven. That's where Jesus is. Paul is dead to everything but Jesus. Are we?

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

1. How does 2 Corinthians 5:1 relate to the context immediately before it?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Nine

2. What reasons does Paul give in 2 Corinthians 9:3-5 for why he wrote to the Corinthians about a subject in which he thought well of them? What applications can we draw from this?
3. What does 2 Corinthians 9:6 tell us about the connection between sowing and reaping in the context of giving? What does this mean? What doesn't this mean?
4. What attitude toward giving does 2 Corinthians 9:7 prescribe? Considering what we already know about giving, why didn't God just pick a number? How should this change our giving?
5. What promise does Paul make in 2 Corinthians 9:8? What is the purpose of the abundance that Paul promises? Why is this important?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Taking Every Thought Captive

Our spiritual state is always in motion. Either we are drawing closer to God, or we are wandering away from Him. Either we are growing, or we are dying. When we decide that we've gotten "good enough" and succumb to complacency, we are listening to Satan's message, not God's.

The home stretch of 2 Corinthians reflects just how aware Paul is of this. Over the past several years, he has had run-in after run-in with the church at Corinth. He has dealt with problems from arrogance to incest, and only just now is emerging from a conflict that he feared would separate him from the Corinthians forever.

However, just as soon as Paul has finished expressing his relief at the choice the Corinthians have made, he's after them again. The last few chapters of 2 Corinthians do not reflect a man who is content to rest on his spiritual laurels or is content to let his brethren rest on theirs. Instead, he tells them that his mission is to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." Not just the thoughts that threaten spiritual ruin for the entire church. Not just the thoughts that say Paul cannot be trusted. Every thought. Christ wants them all, because otherwise the devil will have them all. How many of our thoughts does Jesus have? If it's not a number that we struggle to increase, it's a number we allow to dwindle. When it comes to spiritual matters, "here" can never be good enough.

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

1. What does 2 Corinthians 5:2 tell us about the Corinthians' zeal for giving? How can we emulate this?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Five

2. What is the "earthly tent" Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4? What is Paul's attitude toward it? What should we take from this?
3. What does the clothed/un clothed language in 2 Corinthians 5:2-4 tell us about the difference between earthly and heavenly existence? How should this change us?
4. How does Paul describe life and death in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8? Why is this significant?
5. What is the difference between the two viewpoints described in 2 Corinthians 5:7? Which one should we seek? How do we get there?

6. How does Paul describe his ambition in 2 Corinthians 5:9? What should this ambition drive us to do?

7. According to 2 Corinthians 5:10, on what is the final judgment based? How can this be a distressing message? How can it be a hopeful one?

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

8. In 2 Corinthians 5:11, what is Paul's motivation? What is his action? What results from this action? Why is this important?

9. What does Paul describe as controlling him in 2 Corinthians 5:14? Why? What should we take from this?

10. What does 2 Corinthians 8:19 have to say about the purpose of the collection for the saints? Why do we need to remember this?

11. 2 Corinthians 8:20 mentions Paul's precautions with the gift from the churches. What are they? Why are they important?

12. What principle does Paul express in 2 Corinthians 8:21? Does this have applications for us outside of the realm of church finance? If so, where?

13. 2 Corinthians 8:23 mentions Paul's "brethren". Where else do we see these brethren? How does this show the authenticity of both Acts and 2 Corinthians?

14. How does Paul describe the Corinthians' contribution in 2 Corinthians 8:24? Why would this be true? What can we learn from it?

6. How does Paul use the life of Jesus to explain the way we should give in 2 Corinthians 8:9? What should we take away from this?
7. In 2 Corinthians 8:13-14, how does Paul explain the logical basis for contributing to the welfare of the saints elsewhere? What application should we make from this?

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

8. What does Paul have to say about the earnestness of Titus in 2 Corinthians 8:16-17? What makes Titus so earnest? What does this say about Titus' attitude toward giving?
9. According to 2 Corinthians 8:18-19, why does this brother who is famed in the gospel appear in the context of giving at all? What ought we learn from this?

10. How significant is the death language used through 2 Corinthians 5:14-15? What does this tell us about how far Christ should take us?
11. What does Paul mean when he talks about knowing "according to the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 5:16? What does it mean to know Christ according to the flesh? What has changed in Paul's mind?
12. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, what causes someone to become a new creature? How complete is this transformation? What makes this important?
13. 2 Corinthians 3:3 is the beginning of the sub-part of 2 Corinthians we've been looking at for the past several lessons, and 2 Corinthians 5:18 is the end. How does 2 Corinthians 5:18 mark a transition? Where is Paul taking everything he's just gotten through saying?
14. What does 2 Corinthians 5:21 mean when it says that Christ became sin on our behalf?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Touch Nothing Unclean

One of the biggest and most subtle temptations Christians face is the temptation to blend in. We love Jesus, but Jesus was an outcast. If we are going to walk in Jesus' footsteps, we're going to be outcasts too. The problem is that nobody WANTS to be an outcast. We want all men to speak well of us, at school, on the job, and at the Little League field. So we fudge. We turn a blind eye to morally questionable workplace practices, we laugh at the dirty jokes, and we ignore our friends who swear at the referees. We camouflage our Christianity to avoid the taint of weirdness.

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul takes an uncompromising stand against this kind of camouflaged Christianity. Don't be like everybody else, he tells us. Don't pretend like you're part of the world. Come out from their midst. Be separate. Dare to stand for what's right, even when it's "immoderate" or unpopular. Only then can we be the temple for God that we need to be.

We cannot have a foot in both camps. Either we are for God, or we are for the world. If we follow God at church and slink along with the world everywhere else, we might as well not even bother with the pretense of faith. Would any country at war reward a soldier who fights for his country half the time and for the enemy the other half? If we serve two masters, neither will God reward us.

2 Corinthians 6:1-10

1. How do the first few verses of 2 Corinthians 6 relate back to Paul's discussion for the past few chapters?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Eight

2. In the same verse, Paul describes the contributions made by the Christians in Macedonia as "the grace of God which has been given". What does this mean? What should it teach us?
3. What contrast does Paul make in 2 Corinthians 8:2? What can we learn from this?
4. Describe the attitude of the Macedonians as it is presented in 2 Corinthians 8:3-4. What can we do to claim this attitude for ourselves?
5. Paul discusses "the favor of participation in the support of the saints" in 2 Corinthians 8:4. Why is the opportunity to support needy saints a favor? Consider Matthew 25:34-46 in your answer.



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

The Favor of Participation

We hate to talk about money in a religious context. Whenever we consider the concept of giving, it conjures up images of televangelists who promise us we will win the lottery if we send them \$10,000, or of the denominational churches that offer the Lord's Supper once a year but pass the collection plate once a week. To our ears, even the most Scriptural appeal about the contribution has the overtones of the gospel of greed.

This is lamentable. It keeps us from attending as we should to what the Bible does teach about what it calls "the favor of participation." It works like this: whenever we contribute to our congregation's weekly collection, we share in all the good things that the church leadership decides to support. When the church helps provide for a preacher in Africa, the Lord considers each of us partially responsible for his successes. When the church gives money to needy saints, the spiritual benefit accrues to us.

Do those things matter to us? Are we most committed to laying up treasure in heaven, or do we prefer to make our investments in more tangible bank accounts? Even on earth, we can tell what a man values just by looking at his Visa statements. Don't we think that God can draw the same conclusions? If our heart is really with God, that's where our treasure needs to be too.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

1. As is often true in Paul's writings, he marks a major transition in 2 Corinthians 8:1 with the word "now". What's the new subject?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Six

2. In 2 Corinthians 6:1, Paul urges the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain. How is this possible? Why is the concept important?
3. In 2 Corinthians 6:3-4, why do Paul and his companions seek to avoid giving offense and commend themselves? How do they commend themselves? What can we learn from this?
4. 2 Corinthians 6:4-10 is similar in many ways to 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. How are these two sections similar? How are they different? What point does Paul make with each?
5. Many of the "commendations" that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 6:4-10 are bad things. How are they commendations? What should this teach us?

6. 2 Corinthians 6:4-10 really contains three lists, not one. Where is the transition from the first list to the second? What is Paul trying to tell us with this switch?

7. Where is the switch between List Two and List Three? Once again, what point is Paul trying to make with all of this?

2 Corinthians 6:11-18

8. What does Paul mean in 2 Corinthians 6:11, 13 when he speaks of "opening wide"? What did Paul do to open wide? What does he want the Corinthians to do? Why is this important?

9. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 6:12 that the Corinthians are restrained in their own affections. Why is this a problem? How can it be a problem for us?

10. What two kinds of sorrow does Paul compare in 2 Corinthians 7:10? What does each produce? Why?

11. What fruit of godly sorrow does Paul set out in 2 Corinthians 7:11? What application should we make from this?

12. According to 2 Corinthians 7:12, why did Paul write to the Corinthians about this painful subject? What can we learn from Paul's actions?

13. What do we learn about the interaction of Paul and Titus before Titus went to Corinth from 2 Corinthians 7:13-14? What does this tell us about Paul?

14. As per 2 Corinthians 7:15, how did the Corinthians react to Titus? Was this a good thing or a bad thing? What should we take away from it?

6. What action of God is described in 2 Corinthians 7:6? What are some ways God does this for us today?

7. In 2 Corinthians 7:7, Paul describes his rejoicing in the mourning of the Corinthians. What is the cause of this apparently unloving attitude? What do we need to learn from it?

2 Corinthians 7:8-16

8. In 2 Corinthians 7:8, in what sense does Paul regret the sorrow he caused the Corinthians? In what sense does he not regret it?

9. 2 Corinthians 7:9 mentions "sorrow according to the will of God". Doesn't God want us to be happy? What is Paul talking about?

10. Paul urges the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 6:14 not to be bound together with unbelievers. What was Paul talking about? How can this be a struggle for us?

11. Why didn't Paul want the Corinthians to be bound together with unbelievers? What should we take from this?

12. In what sense does God dwell in us as per 2 Corinthians 6:16?

13. 2 Corinthians 6:17 tells us to come out and be separate. What does God mean? What are some ways we can accomplish this?

14. In 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, God also urges us to touch nothing unclean. What are some unclean things we need to avoid? What are the consequences if we do avoid them?



Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Repentance Without Regret

When we consider the Bible, we must always be aware of the tension between grace and obedience. The Bible tells us that we need both if we want to please God, but we are always tempted to emphasize one at the expense of the other. Satan entices us either to devote ourselves to obedience without grace or to grace without obedience. Both approaches to Christianity are fatally flawed.

We see a symptom of over-reliance on grace in the modern view of forgiveness and repentance. Many contemporary commentators regard repentance as the spiritual equivalent of taking a daily shower. It's a way of dealing with the consequences of a life condition that cannot be changed. We're all going to sin anyway, the argument goes, so we shouldn't worry too much about fighting sin and just rejoice in the abundant grace of God. We can repent of a sin in our lives one day and wander back into the same sin the next day, and it's no big deal.

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul paints a very different picture of what genuine repentance is like. True repentance isn't okay with sin. True repentance doesn't regret the "fun" of sin it's leaving behind. True repentance hates sin and works to defeat it. Certainly, we may struggle with a particular sin for months or years, but our reaction to that sin cannot be a lazy backstroke through an ocean of imagined grace. We have to fight.

2 Corinthians 7:1-7

1. In 2 Corinthians 7:1, what promises does Paul refer to? How does this connect back to Paul's previous discussion?

Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Lesson Seven

2. What does it mean to "perfect holiness in the fear of God" in 2 Corinthians 7:1? How do we need to do this today?
3. What do we learn about the Corinthians' state of mind in 2 Corinthians 7:2? What application can we draw from this today?
4. What does Paul mean when he says in 2 Corinthians 7:3 that the Corinthians are in his heart to live and die together?
5. Describe Paul's mindset in 2 Corinthians 7:4-6. What should we learn from this?