

***Acts 1: Lesson Nine,
Corinthians, Part 3***
2 Corinthians 1 – 7

Subject: Paul wrote to the Corinthians to describe and defend His ministry.
Main Idea: All believers are called to the ministry of reconciliation.

Principles:

1. *Personal suffering can make us more effective ministers.*
2. *Only Christ makes ministry fruitful.*
3. *Fixing our minds on unseen realities will keep us from losing heart.*
4. *Authentic ministry results in changed lives.*

Introduction

If someone asked you first thing this morning to name your mission for the day, how much thinking would it take for you to come up with an answer, and what would your answer be? What would you say dictates your sense of mission? Holidays, special occasions, and work-related events bring extra demands. Does the calendar or do your circumstances determine your mission? Is it dictated by your boss, your family, or your personal needs? If so, you may not actually have a clear sense of mission. It may be ever-changing.

In the first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians, the words “minister” or “ministry” occur nine times. To minister is to give aid or service, to attend to the needs of others. Some people think of ministry as the work of pastors and special church leaders. In truth, it is the mission every believer is given upon conversion. The earthly ministry of Jesus revolved around people and likewise, every Christ-follower is called to minister to others. Paul called our mission “the ministry of reconciliation.” Since we have been reconciled to God in Christ, we are to help others also be reconciled to Him (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). This involves evangelism, but as we see in Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians, it extends to discipleship and building up the body of Christ, in our words and in our actions, so that we’re always helping others reach maturity in Him.

In an earlier letter, Paul admonished the Corinthians to allow the message of the cross to empower and motivate their daily lives: moment-by-moment surrender to the will of the Father. It was a message the Corinthians needed to heed, for their ministry to one another had been poor. They had demanded their personal rights and preferences. Loving and ministering to others requires sacrifice, the way of the cross. Paul was eager for the Corinthians to see that he gladly made this sacrifice that they might be brought to maturity in Christ. As a result, the letter has a defensive tone. His concerns for his relationship with the Corinthians and for defending his ministry are evident, but what was behind these concerns? The letter contains many hints about what happened, and Bible students are left with the task piecing together the information.

As we have discovered, Paul established the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey. He penned 1 Corinthians from Ephesus on his third missionary journey. Sometime after this, he made a second trip to visit the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12:14, 13:1-2), apparently going directly from Ephesus and immediately back. This visit is not recorded in the book of Acts, but Paul referred to it as a “painful visit” (2 Corinthians 2:1). The particular issue is not stated outright but apparently involved a disciplinary issue with one particular man as the main offender (2 Corinthians 2:8, 13:2). Paul followed up that visit with a severe disciplinary letter that he was grieved to write (2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9; 7:8). Although some believe this harsh letter was 1 Corinthians, many believe that this was yet another letter that, by God’s providence, has since been lost.

Whatever the reason for the mysterious visit and the lost letter, by the time Paul’s two-and-a-half years in Ephesus came to an end, he apparently did not know whether the situation in Corinth had been fully resolved. This distressed him so greatly that he considered sailing directly from Ephesus to Corinth once again (2 Corinthians 1:16). In the end, he decided it was best to give the Corinthians more time to respond to his letter. He didn’t want his third visit to be as painful as the previous one had been (2 Corinthians 2:1). Thus, he took the longer route through Troas and Macedonia, collecting an offering for the Jerusalem church as he went.

Meanwhile, Titus was in Corinth urging the Corinthians to prepare their gifts for the collection. But most likely, he was also there as the carrier of Paul’s severe letter, for Paul was dependent on him for information about the Corinthians’ response. Apparently, the two had planned a rendezvous in Troas, but when Titus didn’t arrive with any news of the situation, Paul went on to Macedonia with a heavy heart (2 Corinthians 7:5). Finally, to Paul’s great relief, Titus arrived in Macedonia and reported that the Corinthians were repentant, deeply concerned for Paul, and longed to see him (2 Corinthians 7:7-10). However, Titus reported the emergence of yet another disturbing situation. Some false teachers who claimed to be apostles (2 Corinthians 11:5) had arrived in Corinth and were discrediting Paul’s ministry. This was a serious accusation, since at that time in church history, before the New Testament was complete, the church fully relied on the authority of the apostles’ teachings. To discredit Paul’s apostolic ministry was to discredit the authority of his message. While the majority of the Corinthians responded to Paul’s letter and was eager to see him, a minority had been swayed against him, and the false teachers remained a threat.

After Titus met and reported to Paul in Macedonia, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, in part to express his relief over their response to his letter and in part to describe and defend his apostolic ministry. From the first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians, we learn much about Paul’s ministry and in the process, receive direction and encouragement for our ministry of reconciliation. What should we expect when ministering to others? We will sometimes experience sorrow, but we will see God’s power, and receive motivation and validation. 2 Corinthians 1-7 gives us a realistic glimpse of ministry.

I. Sorrow in Ministry – 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

A. Authorship – 1:1-2: In Paul’s opening greeting, he reminded the Corinthians of his authority as a genuine apostle of Christ Jesus. He was not self-appointed. He held this position according to God’s will, albeit by an atypical appointment. He had not been one of the Twelve during Jesus’ earthly ministry. After Jesus returned to heaven, He appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and commissioned him. The testimony Paul was about to present had witnesses, such as Timothy. Timothy had visited Corinth (Acts 18:5; 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10; 2 Corinthians 1:19) and he was sending the letter along with Paul.

B. Doxology – 1:3-11: Paul often began his letters by focusing on those he was writing (see 1 Corinthians 1, Ephesians 1, Philippians 1, Colossians 1, 1 and 2 Thessalonians 1, 2 Timothy), but this letter starts differently because of its apologetic nature. Paul began by thanking God for comforting him. Paul suffered a variety of hardships; one was the heavy burden of his concern for the Corinthians. He spoke of God in a very intimate way, praising Him as the “Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (verse 3). This passage highlights three truths about the purpose of suffering.

- i. Suffering Enables Us to Comfort Others – 1:3-7: Suffering gives us empathy for those with similar afflictions. They will patiently endure when we share with them the comfort we ourselves received from God in our suffering.
- ii. Suffering Teaches Us to Rely on God – 1:8-10
 1. Trials teach us to rely on God who is the source of comfort and alone can deliver us. Paul mentioned that he experienced troubles in Asia that put him under pressure beyond his own ability to endure. Since Paul said he “despaired of life itself” (verse 8), we shouldn’t judge others who have this emotional response to suffering as ungodly.
 2. Paul did not say what “deadly peril” he had faced in Asia. Some think this was a personal trial he had recently endured in Troas, but he may have been referring to the dangerous riot that precipitated his departure from Ephesus. Regardless, Paul affirmed that the trial increased his dependence on the Lord.
- iii. Suffering Results in Thanksgiving for Answered Prayer – 1:11 Paul noted that suffering gives others the opportunity to pray on our behalf. When others are praying and deliverance occurs, the many who prayed will give thanks to God for answering. Prayer is indeed a sacred privilege. Jesus opened the way so that believers can come directly to the throne of God with their requests (Ephesians 2:18, 3:12; Hebrews 4:16; 1 John 5:14). We do not always see the impact of our prayers in this life, but often we do.

Summary Statement: God allowed Paul to suffer in ministry for a good purpose.

Principle: *Personal suffering can make us more effective ministers.*

Application: Eventually, everyone joins one or more “clubs” of which they would never choose to be part: the club of those who have cancer, the club of those who have been orphaned, the club of those who have been financially ruined, or one of many others. This is simply part of living in a fallen world. But as Paul experienced, sometimes ministry brings sorrow. Almost all Christians bear the sorrow of waiting for loved ones to come to Christ. Working with people, in general, can be painful.

Are you more concerned with seeing people reconciled to God or with avoiding personal pain? If we languish in complaints and ongoing resentment, our suffering can be wasted. What an awful thought! But if we trust God, suffering can catapult us many steps ahead in our spiritual growth and also launch us into God-ordained ministry opportunities. What ministry opportunities have resulted from your sorrows? Who might you comfort this week with comfort you yourself have received from God in your sorrow? No one can minister to someone who is hurting as effectively as someone who has suffered the same affliction.

Transition: After praising the Lord as the God of all comfort, Paul began his defense against the accusations of the false teachers (sarcastically called “super-apostles” in 11:5 and 12:11). Apparently, they claimed Paul’s change in travel plans was evidence of his unreliability.

II. Power in Ministry – 2 Corinthians 1:12-3:18

A. Paul’s Trustworthiness Despite Changed Plans – 1:12-2:4

- i. Background: In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote that he intended to go through Macedonia on his way to Corinth (16:5-9). According to 2 Corinthians 1:15-16, Paul must have later decided to go directly to Corinth, then travel up to Macedonia, and return through Corinth. This would have allowed him to spend time in Corinth twice on this journey. However, as it turned out, he went back to his original plan and went to Macedonia first. Those who were seeking to discredit Paul’s ministry used this as ammunition against him, saying he was fickle, made plans in a worldly manner, and therefore couldn’t be trusted (1:17).
- ii. Paul’s Defense
 1. Paul knew his motives were sincere. He explained that he had returned to his original plan for the sake of the Corinthians. He realized that they needed more time to process and act upon the severe letter he had written (2:3). The emergency trip he had made earlier had been unpleasant, and because he didn’t want this visit to also be unpleasant (2:1), he went back to his first plan.

2. It was important that the Corinthians considered Paul trustworthy. If he wasn't reliable, then how could they receive his teaching as authoritative? God is trustworthy. All of His promises are "yes" in Christ (1:20). The Corinthians could be confident that Paul, God's anointed servant, was also trustworthy.

B. Apostolic Power to Command Forgiveness – 2:5-11

- i. The Offender: Having just alluded to the severe letter, Paul told the Corinthians that they needed to forgive and comfort the brother who had sinned against them. Although Paul gave no details about the nature of the case, he says it was one he had written them about (2:9). Some believe the offender was the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5. More likely, this was another man whose case was the subject of Paul's severe letter (2:3-4).
- ii. The Necessity of Forgiveness: Ministering to others is not easy. The Corinthians had meted out punishment but were overly harsh, overstepping the boundary of what was necessary to bring the man to repentance. Paul told the Corinthians they needed to forgive him. The ministry of reconciliation requires confronting with truth and also grace-giving. Satan will always tempt us to hold grudges, knowing that when we don't forgive, we become resentful, bitter, and ineffective.

C. Power Despite Personal Circumstances – 2:12-3:6

- i. No Peace of Mind Awaiting Titus – 2:12-14: Having given this advice, Paul returned to defending his ministry, explaining the pain he endured on the Corinthians' behalf. After Titus delivered the difficult letter, he was apparently supposed to meet Paul in Troas. As a back-up plan, they would rendezvous in Macedonia. When Paul left Ephesus and arrived in Troas, a door of ministry opened for him there. But he had no peace of mind because Titus never arrived with word about how the Corinthians had responded to his letter. Finally, Paul went on to Macedonia.
- ii. The Aroma of Christ – 2:14-3:6
 1. Paul did not resume his narrative until chapter 7, where he wrote that Titus met him in Macedonia with the good news of the Corinthians' responsiveness. Some explain the break in the narrative by suggesting that 2:14-7:4 constitutes a separate letter that was later inserted in 2 Corinthians. However, many defend the unity of the letter. Paul's sudden expression of thanksgiving is easily explained as his joyful response to God's power at work in and through him during this hardship of waiting for news from Titus. God had ensured that Paul's ministry was powerful and effective and that the "aroma of Christ" spread through him, regardless of his circumstances.

2. Whenever the gospel is preached, some receive it as good news, and for them, it is a fragrant aroma. Others recoil in offense because for them, it is the smell of death. False ministers teach what makes people happy with them (“peddle for profit” [2:17]), but not Paul. He spoke straightforwardly, even though some would be offended. Unlike some who needed letters of recommendation to validate their message, the impact of Paul’s ministry on the Corinthians was his “letter of recommendation.”

D. A Superior Message – 3:7-18: Those who received Paul’s message as a fragrant aroma were effectively freed and transformed. His ministry was powerful because the Gospel message of the New Covenant is powerful, far more glorious than the message of the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law that the “super-apostles” apparently insisted upon. To make this point, Paul compared the ministers of the New Covenant to ministers of the Old Covenant. Moses administrated the Old Covenant. It was from God, so the giving of the Law was not without effect. Whenever Moses was in God’s presence, God’s glory radiated from his face. But once he left God’s presence, the reflection faded. The Old Covenant was like this. It was glorious *until* the new, superior covenant came. The Old Covenant’s glory pales in comparison to the New. The Law condemned sinners but the New Covenant rescues, frees, and transforms, giving life to sinners. The Law only revealed God and His purposes indirectly. The New Covenant reveals God and His purposes directly in the person of Christ. God is the source of the transformational power of this superior message. Only His Spirit can remove the veil that covers our spiritual eyes and dulls us to spiritual truth, so that we understand and receive it as good news.

Summary Statement: In defense of his ministry, Paul pointed to the superiority and power of the gospel: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (3:5), who alone effectively transforms people.

Principle: *Only Christ makes ministry fruitful.*

Application: What keeps you from ministering to others with confidence? You do not need a certain kind of personality, a particular skill set, or even an abundance of free time. You only need to make yourself available to the Lord, take the opportunities He gives, and trust Him with the results. He alone is the source of transforming power in ministry. We need to look to Him. Paul wrote, “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate [reflect] the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His image with every increasing glory, which comes from the Lord” (3:18). God will transform those to whom we minister by His power and He also increasingly transforms us, the ministers, into His image as we look to Him.

Transition: Assisting others can be challenging, to say the least. In 4:1-5:10, Paul explained what kept him from losing heart.

III. Motivation in Ministry – 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:10

A. The Holy Spirit's Renewal – 4:1-18

- i. The Mercy of the Ministry – 4:1-6: One reason Paul did not lose heart was that he had seen God change lives through his ministry. However simple Paul's presentation of the truth, the spiritual eyes of some were opened and God's light shone in their hearts. Paul felt blessed that God mercifully gave him the privilege of participating in this ministry of reconciliation.
- ii. A Treasure in Jars of Clay – 4:7-11: That did not mean that ministry isn't hard. Paul explained that messengers of the gospel are like jars of clay, "inexpensive and easily broken."ⁱ In his own ministry, he was hard pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. He carried the death of Christ in his body, in that he constantly faced difficulty. At times, his very life was threatened. He was given over to death so that Christ's powerful life could be revealed in him. Humanly, Paul was helpless, but his frailty only served to highlight the sustaining power of God.
- iii. Paul's Confidence – 4:12-18: The troubles Paul faced were surely discouraging, but he did not lose heart. These were only "light and momentary" earthly troubles (4:17). Outwardly, he grew physically weaker and was "wasting away," but inwardly, the Holy Spirit continually renewed him. This unseen reality encouraged and motivated his ministry.

B. Our Heavenly Dwelling – 5:1-8

- i. The Unclothing of Our Bodies: Paul compared our earthly bodies to a tent that we leave behind at our death. We groan because we want our deteriorating bodies to be replaced with permanent, glorious, heavenly ones. But none of us looks forward to death. Death "unclothes" us. However, Paul said that we have an eternal house in heaven. In 1 Corinthians, Paul taught that at Christ's return, we will receive new resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15:50-53), but we may wonder what happens to the souls of those who die in Christ until He returns. Paul longed to be clothed with his house from heaven. What did he mean by that? What is this house? Three theories have been proposed.
 1. The first is that the house is heaven itself. In other words, our souls are immediately with the Lord, even though they are disembodied until Christ's return.

2. The second is that Paul was talking about our resurrection bodies, in which case, the passage deals only with what happens to our bodies after Christ's second coming and doesn't inform us about the state of our soul between death and the resurrection.
 3. The third is that our souls dwell in heaven in temporary bodies of some sort after we die and before Christ returns and we receive our permanent, resurrection bodies.ⁱⁱ
- ii. With the Lord: Regardless of what Paul meant by the heavenly dwelling, he affirmed that to be away from the body is to immediately be with the Lord (verse 8). Death is the final enemy, but believers need not fear it, because for us, it opens the door into God's presence. We will consciously know and rejoice that we are in heaven with the Lord!

C. The Judgment Seat of Christ – 5:9-10: Paul said we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that we may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. This judgment is not to determine our salvation, which is already guaranteed to believers, but to receive the rewards due us. This yet unseen future reality further motivated Paul to obediently persevere in his ministry.

Summary Statement: The blessing of seeing God's transformational power at work, the Holy Spirit's personal inward renewal, and the inevitability of future reward kept Paul from losing heart in ministry.

Principle: *Fixing our minds on unseen realities will keep us from losing heart.*

Application: Ministering to others is often ugly work and not for the faint of heart. Sometimes, we are called to minister to especially difficult people. What is keeping you from losing heart in ministry? Do you rely primarily on externals to keep you going in draining situations? Or do you spend time alone with the Lord, allowing His Spirit to inwardly renew you through prayer, thanksgiving, meditation on His word, and rejoicing over the heavenly dwelling and rewards that await you?

Transition: Paul was concerned that the false teachers who had come to Corinth had destroyed his credibility by challenging the authenticity of his apostolic ministry. In response, Paul once again pointed to the impact of his ministry and message on individual lives as validation.

IV. Validation in Ministry – 2 Corinthians 5:11-7:16

A. New Creatures in Christ – 5:11-6:2

- i. A Work of Christ's Love: Paul wanted to give the Corinthians the confidence in him that they should have had all along. Those who tried to

undermine his ministry claimed that he was out of his mind (5:13). Paul's rebuttal was that these men were motivated by "what is seen" (5:12). As he had explained, he was motivated by unseen realities. One of these unseen realities was the basis of his ministry: the saving work and love of Christ.

- ii. A Ministry of Reconciliation: Christ died so that we might be reconciled to God, and He called Paul (and He has called us) to the ministry of reconciling others to Him. We are ambassadors of the gospel. When individuals are reconciled to God through Christ, they are radically changed. They become a "new creation" (5:17). This does not mean instant perfection but rather, a new perspective. We live life turned toward God, rather than turned away from Him. One day, His universal work of re-creation will be made complete (Revelation 21:4-5), but that work began within each of us at our conversion. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). The Corinthians were new creatures in Christ and this was validation of Paul's ministry.

B. Evidence in Paul's Life – 6:13-7:1

- i. Paul's Person – 6:3-13: The Corinthians had looked at externals, such as letters of recommendation, to authenticate a teacher (3:1). They had forgotten to look for other kinds of validation. Paul held up his very life for them to examine. Enduring hardships, acting with integrity, and his deep affection validated his ministry. On the basis of these evidences, he implored the Corinthians to open wide their hearts to him.
- ii. Paul's Fatherly Appeal to Holiness – 6:14-7:1
 1. *Purpose of the Passage*: Suddenly, in the midst of Paul's passionate entreaty, he introduced what appears to be an entirely unrelated subject. In 6:13, he begged, "I speak to you as my children – open wide your hearts also." In 7:2, he resumed his plea, "Make room for us in your hearts..." Since 6:14-7:1 appears to break the train of thought, some believe that these verses may belong to one of Paul's lost letters and were later inserted into 2 Corinthians. However, Paul was in the midst of proving the authenticity of his ministry. Speaking of his hardships, honesty, and deep affections as validation may have caused him to again recall the severe letter he had written. The verses address personal holiness. Perhaps that was also the root problem and subject of his previous letter. As chapter 7 later reveals, the Corinthians had repented and corrected that particular issue, thus he did not address them severely this time but as a father would speak to his children (6:13) and as "dear friends" (7:1).

2. *Unequally Yoked*

- a. A few Bible translations have translated the term “unequally yoked” as “mismatched.” This idea comes from the term’s use in an Old Testament passage, which forbids breeding different species of animals (Leviticus 19:19). Although it is not incorrect to assume that marriage between believers and unbelievers applies, the rhetorical questions Paul asked indicate that he had had a broader principle in mind: “What fellowship can light have with darkness?” (6:14). Furthermore, Paul’s thought is summarized in 7:1 with the words, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”
- b. The Christian is moving progressively toward holiness. Paul was not implying that we should live in isolation. Rather, he was affirming the basic incompatibility of evil and holiness. “Christians have nothing in common with the darkness and evil and unrighteousness and immorality that claims the loyalties of those who are as yet not reconciled with God.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Personal holiness, in all aspects of life, is our goal – separation from evil and dedication to God. The Corinthians could not be God’s temple and also allow rival suitors for their affections. Allowing rivals is idolatry and was certainly a problem Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians, if not also in his severe letter.
- c. The Corinthians had repented and were working to perfect holiness. However, Paul may have restated the problem from his earlier letter to encourage them to apply the principle once again with regard to their relationship with the false teachers. His fatherly plea for holiness was another validation of his authenticity as a minister of the gospel.

C. Evidenced by the Corinthians’ Repentance – 7:2-16: Paul was greatly relieved when he learned from Titus that the Corinthians had responded to his former letter with godly sorrow and repentance. He arrived in Macedonia (where he was writing) “harassed at every turn – conflicts on the outside, fears within” (7:5). But God comforted him with the arrival of Titus and the news of the Corinthians’ longing for Paul, their deep sorrow, and ardent concern (7:7). He had regretted writing such a harsh letter at the time, but now he rejoiced because it had produced the intended result. Not only did the Corinthians’ obedience encourage Paul, it also greatly encouraged Titus.

Summary Statement: Not only was Paul's ministry validated by his own life, as a result of his severe letter and ministry, the Corinthians themselves had changed.

Principle: *Authentic ministry results in changed lives.*

Application: Whose life is changing as a direct result of your ministry to them? We do not always see an immediate result. Transformation sometimes comes from the cumulative ministry of many believers over a period of months or years. In some cases, we may never see or hear of it this side of heaven. However, when we are ministering in God's power and under His direction, He often graciously gifts us with encouraging glimpses of transformation, and sometimes, we witness radical change.

Conclusion

Perhaps you have thought of ministry as the work of pastors and others with certain gifts. Paul taught that every Christ follower is called to be a minister of reconciliation. If you cannot point to a single person who God is currently transforming as a direct result of your involvement in their life, you may not have a clear sense of your God-given mission. We were once sinners in desperate need of a Savior. But when Christ saved us, He called us to *help others*.

Before Paul encountered Christ on the road to Damascus, his mission had been to persecute believers. But the living Christ changed that mission and Paul immediately started sharing the gospel (Acts 9:2-21). We share this ministry of reconciliation. Each of us has an important role in bringing others to faith and spiritual maturity in Christ.

ⁱ Kruse, C. G. (1994). 2 Corinthians. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (4th ed., p. 1196). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

ⁱⁱ Packer, J. I. (1995). Introduction. In A. McGrath (Ed.), *2 Corinthians* (2 Co 5:1). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (p. 626). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.