

Downward and Outward
Part 12: Examining yourself for the work of Jesus
II Corinthians 12.11-13.10

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David Henderson

This morning we are nearing the end of our sermon series Downward and Outward, which has been a study of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

This morning we circle back around to the issue that sparked the letter in the first place.

You may remember from the beginning of the series that the main issue Paul was addressing in this letter was that the Corinthians were evaluating his ministry through the success-oriented values of the surrounding world instead of on the basis of the humble, sacrificial, other-centered life and ministry of Jesus, which leads them to call the legitimacy of his ministry into question.

Paul has already addressed those issues earlier in his letter, but only indirectly. In the passage we are looking at today, Paul circles back around and addresses these themes again, but now he addresses them more directly. But the way he does it is confusing. He adopts a tone in his writing that isn't normal for Paul. Is he being sarcastic? Is he being manipulative? What exactly is going on here? And what does that suggest about how we can or should respond when we come under attack by our brothers and sisters?

The section of scripture we have to look at this morning – most of chapters 12 and 13 – is a long one. Instead of trying to walk you through the whole chapter and a half, I just want to focus in on three verses that are at the heart of what Paul is addressing.

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First, Paul reminds the Corinthians, and us too, that at the heart of all God-honoring ministry and service is not accomplishment or achievement or impact or numbers or legacy or making a name for yourself, but just one thing – sacrificial love, following the example of Jesus, seeking God's best for you even when it costs me. Not spending and being spent for me, but for you. That's the driving force behind all God-honoring ministry and service.

That comes out in **II Corinthians 12.15** where Paul, describing his ministry among the Corinthians, writes

I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.

Some of you are aware that I just got back from a two week mission trip with Daaron Fleegeer and Todd and Joshua Dinius. It was such a striking thing for me to have a chance to go to on this trip with these words of Paul ringing in my ears, because I feel as though I got to see these words lived out in front of me for two weeks straight.

The primary purpose of this trip was to carry out two Seminary in a Suitcase conferences to equip and encourage pastors, one in Romania and one in Egypt, and then also to come alongside and encourage a family that we sent out from Covenant to a closed country in the Middle East fifteen years ago.

You know this, because I tell you every time I get back from a trip like this, but we as a church family are so blessed to be able to partner with amazing and godly men and women throughout the world whose lives exemplify the humble and faithful ministry of a true servant of Christ.

Daaron, David, and Doru



One of those is Doru Butas, a joyful and humble pastor who leads and serves a group of about twenty five church planters in Romania. What an incredible guy and what a dear friend.

The Romanian pastors



Daaron and I were blessed to spend three days together with those pastors and church planters from all across Romania, encouraging them and equipping them in their very challenging work.

Some of these pastors serve two or three churches at a time. Several serve among the gypsies, against whom many Romanians hold deep prejudices. Others have developed

incredible ministries for Ukrainian refugees, helping to provide housing and food and jobs and schools for those who have come across the border into their cities.

Many face hostile responses from Orthodox church leaders and town officials. One shared with us that he has served in a community for twelve years, and just saw the first person come to Christ as a result of his ministry in the last few months. And yet they steadily labor on, serving the Lord with great faithfulness.

The Romanian pastors and their wives and families



This was a special gathering not only for the pastors, but also for their wives and families who were able to join them, thanks to Covenant's generosity in making that possible.

For many of these families, this will be the only time this year they will be able to get away together from the demands and struggles of ministry. What a privilege to be able to give this gift to them, and to see what it meant to them!

At the end of a week in Romania, Daaron headed home, with a full heart, having made lots of new friends, not only with these Romanian pastors,

Daaron enjoying the local art in Romania



. . . but also with some of the local wildlife.

Then I hopped on a plane to Cairo, where Todd and Joshua Dinius joined me.

Nathan, Sawsan, Martin, Todd, and Joshua



I'm sure you remember our dear friends and ministry partners Nathan and Sawsan Bassally, who were just here a month ago. Here are Todd and Joshua with Nathan and Sawsan and their delightful son Martin, who has begun to work part time with them.

What amazing people and what incredibly selfless ministry: providing Christian education for children, children's curriculum for churches, food and blankets and microloans for Sudanese refugees, vocational training for Egyptians to help them find jobs in a struggling economy, plus monthly training for pastors from all across the country and throughout the region.

The Egyptian pastors



This is the amazing group of pastors I got to equip and encourage in the training center that Covenant helped pay for about ten years ago.

Each of these leaders serves the Lord in incredibly costly settings. They have all made great sacrifices to respond to God's call to go into ministry. Each of them has set aside some other more lucrative vocation in order to serve Christ in the church. Some of them have been rejected by their families because of their Christian faith. But you can just see on their faces the joy they find in knowing and serving the Lord despite those challenges.

Then Todd and Joshua and I went on from there to spend time with a family that was sent out from this church to an incredibly challenging portion of the Middle East a decade and a half ago.

Walking with Mission Partners in the Middle East



They moved there, found jobs, started a family, and began slowly to develop relationships and build trust with the local people. And now each day they seek as a family – mom, dad, and three kids – to faithfully live out a distinctive life of love in a country that has so few believers they could all fit in our balcony.

We went to encourage them, but what an encouragement to us to see their lives of quiet and costly faithfulness over the past fifteen years.

II Corinthians 12.15

I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.

In Romania, in Egypt, and in that unnamed country, we were so blessed to experience men and women whose lives demonstrate this self-giving quality that Paul describes – men and women whose daily lives boil down to: seeking God's best for another person even when it costs us.

And if I could hold up a mirror in front of you right now, I'd love to, because this is who so many of you are as well: loving one another and loving your neighbors with generosity and kindness and love.

So the first thing I wanted to do was just hold before us a picture of the sort of true servant of Christ that Paul holds up in II Corinthians, one whose life is given away in love. That's who Paul was, that's who Paul encourages us to be, and that's who so many of you are.

* * *

The second thing I'd like to do is just give a word or two about the confusing tone and approach that Paul takes in II Corinthians chapters 10 through 13, and what conclusions we might draw from that.

I think this is especially important as we find ourselves near the end of another harsh and divisive election cycle, and have watched men and women attack one another and

tear each other apart in very public ways that are deeply inconsistent with the faith we proclaim.

The Corinthian believers have been incredibly critical of Paul and his ministry. Paul doesn't have the sort of ministry they thought he should, and they have been harsh in their criticism.

They criticize his physical appearance, and say he lacks personality and charisma.

They complain that his speech is unimpressive and lacks power, and that he didn't go on the attack and tear apart his opponents like other Christian leaders do.

They complain that he does not boast about himself or promote himself enough. He is always pointing past himself and putting others first and they see that as a sign of weakness.

And they complain that he doesn't present himself as a success, and he has refused to let them support him. As a result, his life is marked by struggle and suffering and sacrifice that they believe casts both him and them in a bad light.

So Paul wrote this letter in response to their accusations.

He addresses their concerns in two sections of the letter. In the first section, in chapters 2 through 6, we saw that Paul steered away from any direct response to their attacks. Instead, he just paints a picture of what a faithful servant of God looks like: a conquered captive, a Christlike follower, a common container holding extraordinary treasure, an ambassador of the king, someone marked by integrity, patience, kindness, and love.

But then, as he comes to this second section, in chapters 10 through 13, he feels a need to respond more directly to their accusations.

II Corinthians 13.3

You are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me.

But now there is a new tone and a new approach that is introduced into the letter. And it's confusing for us as we read it two thousand years later, as ones who are unfamiliar with the rules of rhetoric that ruled the ancient world.

Has Paul suddenly become sarcastic and attacking and manipulative? It sure seems that way, at least at a quick glance. But that isn't actually the case. Let me try to clarify what is actually what's going on.

Paul believes he needs to respond directly to some of the accusations that have been made against him. But this puts him completely at odds with himself.

He wants to respond to their critique, but the last thing he wants to do is boast in his own abilities or successes, as though his ministry results were because of him.

He needs to somehow respond to the accusations they make, even though they are all built on a completely flawed evaluation grid, on the self-seeking values and priorities of the world, and he is utterly unwilling to look at his ministry in their secular, success-oriented terms.

And he simply will not lower himself to their level and play their game. He refuses to go after them and tear them apart, in spite of the way they've come after him so harshly. He is committed to speaking the truth, but doing so in love.

So through most of this second section, chapters 10 through 13, you feel Paul wrestling with himself. He narrates out loud to the Corinthians the tension he is feeling as he writes these words:

"I feel like I'm acting like a fool!" he says three times in chapter 11 (11.1, 16, 17). And "I feel like I'm out of my mind!" he says at the end of that same chapter (11.23). "But you have asked me specific questions and you made specific allegations about me, so I feel a need to respond directly."

I wish we had time to walk through Paul's response verse by verse – we don't.

But here's what I want us to see. Paul's spiritual authority was called into question, and he felt it was important to defend the legitimacy of his ministry, but look at how he does it. He comes under attack from the very people who should be celebrating his ministry, and if you look closely at his words, through all the rhetoric and wrestling, you see

- He responds with grace and humility.
- He openly expresses his affection for them despite their attacks.
- He defends his ministry without being defensive
- He explains his approach without turning things around attacking them
- He invites them to come around to a different perspective without manipulating a response or threatening consequences
- He doesn't strike back. He speaks the truth without being unkind or tearing them down, refusing to lower himself to their level.
- And all while refusing to make it about himself. With every sentence he continues to point past himself to the one he serves with such joy.

No wonder we sense Paul wrestling through this section!

What a different way to respond than what we see modeled in the world around us, and unfortunately, sometimes by the larger church of which we are a part. I think we have much to learn from Paul about how to respond when we come under attack.

* * *

Here's the last verse I want to have us focus on.

It shouldn't surprise us that, as he comes to the close of his letter, Paul gently turns the tables, and lovingly presses back on the Corinthians.

Up to this point they have pressed him to examine the legitimacy of his leadership. Now he lovingly presses them to examine the legitimacy of their faith.

Several places in the letter he expresses his concern about where they are spiritually. For instance, in II Corinthians 11.3 he writes

I am afraid that ... your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Bringing the issue to a head, he writes in **II Corinthians 13.5-6**

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

I'd like to use the remainder of our time to explore the significance of the question Paul is raising here.

So a couple of things to notice about what Paul writes here.

II Corinthians 13.5-6

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

First, when Paul uses this expression "in the faith," it implies that there is another category of people as well, those who are "outside the faith," right?

It also implies that there must be some sort of step a person has to take, some sort of door that a person has to walk through, in order to go from "outside the faith" to "in the faith."

Jesus says as much when he says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7.14

The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Second, when Paul says we should “examine or test ourselves” to see which category we’re in, that implies that there must be some urgency about this. There must be something at stake; which group we’re in must be important for some reason.

Jesus would agree. He says that what is at stake is nothing less than the abundant life that he came to offer to humanity – the life that is found when he brings us into relationship with his heavenly father and we become children of God and enjoy a relationship with God forever.

When Paul urges us to examine ourselves it also implies that we might assume we’re in one group when we’re actually in the other. That suggests there might be some confusion about what it means to be “in the faith.”

That confusion remains today. Depending on who you ask, people define being a Christian as someone who is

1. an American
2. a church goer
3. a good person
4. a Republican
5. a Democrat
6. someone who has prayed something known as a sinner’s prayer
7. someone who is seeking to pattern their life after what Jesus said and did

So . . . How do we know if we have actually passed through the gate from the group “outside the faith” into the group of those who are “in the faith”? What are the criterion against which we should test ourselves?

I went back through this second letter from Paul to the Corinthians and made a list of the things Paul assumes will characterize those who are “in the faith.” Let’s just walk through those now to make sure we’re clear about what the Bible teaches about being a follower of Christ.

First, to begin with, Paul shares with us in chapter four the simple message that is at the heart of the Christian faith, It is the earliest creed: “We preach . . . Jesus Christ as Lord” (4.5). Anyone who is in the faith will affirm that Jesus is the King, and place himself or herself under his loving rule. That’s the door we walk through that takes us from “outside the faith” to those who are “in the faith.” Our recognizing him as king and lord.

Jesus is the way we know God; through Jesus we come face to face with the living God. As Paul elaborates in chapter four, that’s the core of the good news that we share with the world. “The light of the gospel displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (4.4). So when a person is in the faith, “God . . . makes his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.” (4.6)

So how will that kind of faith show up in a person's life? What is the evidence of genuine faith? You might just jot these down so you can go back over them and give them some thought later. According to Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians – and you find the same themes in his other letters –

Evidence of genuine faith

- New person (1.22, 5.17)
- New relationship (5.18, 11.3)
- New character (6.6, 6.15)
- New family (1.1, 13.11)
- New allegiance (5.15, 10.7)
- New purpose (4.15, 5.14)
- New mission (5.11, 5.20)

One mark of genuine faith is that I am a

New person:

- He set his seal of ownership on us and put his Spirit in our heart 1.22
- Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation 5.17

Jesus describes this in John chapter 4 as a new birth. We are born anew, born from above. There is something in us that comes alive to God. We become new people, people whose lives reflect that we belong to him. Has something come alive in you toward God? Do you experience God's power and presence within?

Another mark of genuine faith is that I have a

New relationship with God

- God reconciled us to himself through Christ 5.18
- We have sincere and pure devotion to Christ 11.3

God created us to be in a love relationship with himself forever. It is the reason we exist. Is that your experience? Do you know God? Paul says "Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?" Do you have a sense of God's presence within? Do you experience him as part of your daily life? Do you worship him? Talk with him? Walk with him?

Another mark of genuine faith is that I have a

New character:

- We show we are true servants of God by our purity, understanding, patience, kindness, love, treating people right 6.6
- A believer has nothing in common with an unbeliever 6.15

God promises to form the likeness of his own son in those who are his children. Are you different from who you used to be? Are you different from the people around you? Do you see the Christ-like qualities of love, gentleness, humility, kindness, patience,

forming in you more and more over time? Do those who are closest to you see him in you?

Another mark of genuine faith is that you recognize you are part of a

New family:

We are God's holy people 1.1

Other followers of Christ are our brothers and sisters, and we live with them in peace 13.11

When our relationship with God comes alive, our relationship with his people comes alive too. Do you see yourself as part of something larger – God's family? Do you recognize fellow believers as fellow family members? Do you have an affection for them? Do you have a heart to serve and encourage them?

Another mark of genuine faith is that you have a

New allegiance:

We no longer live for ourselves but for him 5.15

We belong to Jesus 10.7

Scholars are more and more persuaded that the word "faith" means "allegiance" – surrendering your life to Jesus, placing your life under his loving rule. Does your life show signs of him being the most important person to you, even more important than yourself? Have you surrendered yourself to him and declared him king and lord?

Another mark of genuine faith is that you have a

New purpose:

that thanksgiving may overflow to the glory of God 4.15

Christ's love compels us 5.14

When we come alive to Jesus, new purpose defines our lives. We live for the glory of God in all that we do, and we seek to live a life of love with all that we meet. Does your life demonstrate what one person calls "the expulsive power of a new affection?" Are you determined to let God's purposes become yours? To live a life of love to the glory of God?

According to Paul, a final mark of genuine faith is that you have a

New mission:

we try to persuade others 5.11

the ministry of reconciliation has been committed to us 5.20

When we are in the faith, we begin to see those who are outside the faith in a different light. As Paul says, we no longer see others from a worldly point of view. We see them as God sees them, and their spiritual wellbeing begins to matter to us. More and more, as Paul says in 6.1, "we seek to urge others to receive God's grace." Do you find your concern growing for the spiritual wellbeing of others?

If you look at that list and see evidence of those marks of faith in your life, what a great occasion as we close to turn to God in gratitude and praise for his gracious presence and work in your life, awakening you to himself and drawing you into a relationship with himself.

And if you look at that list and realize you are standing outside the faith, I don't want to let the morning go by without giving you the chance to step inside.

I'm going to close with a prayer of commitment and I invite you to pray along silently if this expresses where you find yourself today. Would you pray with me?

Jesus, I believe that when I look at your face I see the face of God.

I believe you are King and Lord, and you came to rescue me from a life lived for me, and to bring me into a life lived for you.

I believe you died on the cross in my place, and when I trust you I am forgiven for my sins and reconciled to God, able to enjoy the relationship with God for which I was made.

I accept your gift of forgiveness and new life. I open my life to your loving presence. I turn from a life lived for me and choose to become your faithful subject, to live my life under your loving rule.

Lead me into the life you intend for me, Lord, and I will follow.

Jesus, in your name we pray this. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer this morning, if you took that step of faith, be sure to let us know so we can celebrate with you and encourage you as you begin your new life of faith.

If in listening to this morning's message you realize that you are outside the faith, and you would like the chance to talk through some of your questions and objections to the faith, please come join me at the next Conversation about Christianity a week from Wednesday, November 13.

And if you see evidence in your life that you are in the faith, consider making an investment of two hours next Sunday night to equip yourself to be better able to share your faith with others in order that they can be blessed to experience God in the same way that you have.

Prayer:

Lord, let who you say we are – your beloved children – define how we love, how we serve, how we forgive, how we live.