

2 CORINTHIANS



For the Sake
of the Gospel

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Introduction

In 2 Corinthians, Paul opens his heart to the church in ancient Corinth, defending his apostleship not for his own reputation, but so that the gospel of Christ will not be hindered. He reminds believers that ministry is not about outward impressiveness, but about the power of God working through weak vessels. Paul's suffering, his integrity, and his sacrificial service all flow from one central reality: *the love of Christ controls us* (2 Cor. 5:14).

Paul declares that God, in Christ, has reconciled us to Himself and entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Every hardship, every act of generosity, every defense of truth is for the sake of the gospel, so that others might see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The letter crescendos with the reminder that our sufficiency is from God, our boast is in Christ alone, and our hope is the all-sufficient grace of the risen Lord who says: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."*

For Paul and us, the message is clear: We endure, speak, give, and live only for the sake of the gospel, that Jesus may be magnified in all things.

Helpful Details

Author & Date: Written by the Apostle Paul around AD 55–56 after his “painful visit” to Corinth and writing a “severe letter” (2 Cor. 2:1-4).

Relationship with Christians in Corinth: The Corinthian church had been influenced by “super-apostles” who challenged Paul’s authority, criticized his sufferings, and promoted a distorted gospel.

Purpose: Paul writes to defend his apostolic ministry, call the church back to loyalty to Christ, encourage generosity for the Jerusalem saints, and confront false teaching.

Tone: The most personal and emotional of Paul’s letters; both pastoral and apologetic, mixing deep affection with firm correction.

Letters to Corinth: Scholars believe there were at least four letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthians. By God’s design, only two of these were preserved as Scripture (1 and 2 Corinthians). Refer to the table on the following page.

Letters to Corinth

Letter #	Description	Status
1	"Previous letter" (1 Cor. 5:9)	Unavailable
2	1 Corinthians	In the NT
3	"Severe letter" (2 Cor. 2:4)	Unavailable
4	2 Corinthians	In the NT

Recommended Reading

[Free Online Commentary](#) by The Gospel Coalition

[Articles and Devotionals](#) by Ligonier Ministries

[Introductory Commentary](#) by Colin Kruse

[Advanced Commentary](#) by George Guthrie

2 Corinthians 10

MAIN POINT

The church in Corinth had false teachers who questioned Paul's ministry because it was unimpressive by the world's standards. Thus, they continued to undermine the gospel Paul preached. Paul counters that true verification comes from the Lord.


GROUP INTRO

When have you seen someone lead *quietly* but with profound impact?

TEXT

1. Read verses 1-6. What kind of war is Paul describing here, and where in the Bible do signs of this war first show up?

Leader help: Paul's talking about a spiritual war, not a physical/political battle. Though he's a normal person (he walks "in the flesh"), he doesn't fight like the rest of the world. Instead, he uses spiritual weapons and methods that have divine power to destroy "strongholds." These strongholds include arguments, lofty opinions (or "arrogance" or "pride"), and thoughts raised against the knowledge of God, and all of this shows up in the Garden of Genesis 3, when the enemy questions the words of God (see Gen. 3:1). Jesus fought this war with the Word (see Matt. 4:1-11) and sacrificial love, just as Paul's trying to do.


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2. Look again at verses 1-6, along with verses 7-12. What are some things Paul's being criticized for, and how does his response reflect the character of Christ?

Leader help: Paul's being accused of "walking according to the flesh" (i.e., walking without true spiritual power as just an average person). On one hand, he's accused of being bold in writing but weak in person, while on the other hand, he's accused of boasting in his own authority. He clarifies that his authority and power come from God, and he does his best to appeal to the Corinthians through the meekness and gentleness of Jesus, even when he is criticized, falsely accused, and mocked. This is like the merciful restraint Jesus shows toward sinners; even when we were actively opposing Him, He didn't retaliate or crush us with His awesome power. Instead, Jesus was gentle and merciful toward us (see Rom. 5:10; Matt. 11:28-30).

3. Paul's ultimate reason for defending his ministry is to see the gospel go beyond Corinth, to sinners across the world, because he's confident in God's approval of him. Read verses 13-18.

What's it look like to "boast in the Lord"?


Leader help: It looks like accepting your natural limitations, weaknesses, and boundaries; rejoicing in whatever the Lord assigns you to do, within the limits He's placed on you; and giving Him credit for whatever success or accomplishments you experience. For further examples of this, read Jeremiah 9:23-24. In a world filled with people who flood their social media with selfies, boasting, and self-glorification, boasting in the Lord sticks out.

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4. Read verses 17-18. Why does the approval of the Lord matter for every person, whether or not they're a Christian?

Leader help: Every life ends in death. We will all stand before the Lord. God will reject those who stand on their own moral, social, or political accomplishments and on the approval of others. Those who stand by faith alone in Christ alone, who know they're failures and sinners in and of themselves but have accepted the gracious approval of God, will be welcomed by God and told, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (see Matt. 25:21).

APPLICATION

1. In the wake of cultural pressure against Christianity, some social media influencers advocate for greater appearances of outward strength, dominance, and political activism from Christian leaders, citing examples like Jesus using a whip or sternly rebuking religious leaders. Why is this a mistaken approach?
2. If Paul wasn't grounded in his identity as God's beloved child, he might have sought his identity in his abilities or his position as an Apostle. When you're criticized or slandered, where are you tempted to find your identity? How does the gospel help you stay grounded in your true identity?



3. If you're a Christian, you have the Lord's approval. Why does this matter, and how might your life be changed if you actually accepted this every day?

PRAYER

Pray that Jesus would align your thoughts, desires, and motivations with His Word, so that you're interested in pleasing Him, not others.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 86:11

Confess your desire for the approval of others and the ways you've compared yourself with others. Ask God to forgive you for these sins.

Passage to guide your prayers: Galatians 1:10

Praise God for His free and gracious acceptance of you, and ask Him to ground you in His love.

Passage to guide your prayers: Ephesians 3:14-19

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

MAIN POINT

Paul is angry, and rightly so. He paints himself as a good friend who introduced Corinth (a bride) to Jesus (the groom). Now Corinth is betraying Christ with “super-apostles” (false teachers). How? By not outright rejecting the false teachers and their fake gospel.

GROUP INTRO

What qualities or characteristics make someone a spiritually trustworthy leader?

TEXT

1. Read verses 1-3. Why does Paul describe his concern for the Corinthians as “divine (or “godly”) jealousy,” and what does this reveal about the nature of *Christian* leadership?

Leader help: Christian leaders aren't self-focused; they're focused on the glory of God and the good of those they lead. Paul's "jealousy" is divine/godly because it mirrors or dimly reflects God's own covenant love for His people. God describes Himself as jealous throughout Scripture (see Ex. 34:14; Deut. 4:24). When God's people give their allegiance or worship to idols or other people, it erodes and destroys them, ultimately separating them from their Creator. Since we're created to worship God only, and God fiercely loves us, He demands total allegiance; anything else will kill us.

2. Read verses 3-4 and verses 12-15. Even today, cults such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the World Mission Society Church of God use "Jesus," "gospel," and "spirit" in reference to unbiblical realities. Based on Paul's words, how should these Christians have responded to the unrepentant false teachers, and why?

Leader help: Paul accuses the Corinthians of putting up with these false teachers and their doctrine (i.e., being tolerant). Paul's counter to this tolerance is emphasizing the satanic origin and nature of these false teachers, and highlighting the eternal stakes of tolerating their false doctrine: to accept or tolerate false teachers is to accept lies and be led away from the real Jesus and salvation (see Gal. 1:8-9). The response to false doctrine must be a clear, decisive rejection of it and a rejection of anyone who unrepentantly teaches it. We aren't talking here about someone confused or uninformed, but someone who continually teaches false doctrine, even after being confronted and corrected.

3. Read verses 5-11. What's Paul boasting about here, and how are Paul's actions Christ-like?

Leader help: In the Corinthian culture, professionally trained speakers charged for their services. Rather than "burdening" these Christians by charging them for proclaiming the gospel, Paul "burdened" other churches (i.e., got financial support) so that the Corinthians could freely receive the gospel message.

Leader help continued on the next page.

Leader help: Paul's somewhat mocking the boasting of the false teachers by "boasting" about the way he's humbled himself for the good of others.

Rather than exalting himself and putting emphasis on his presentation of the gospel, Paul wants attention on the gospel itself. It's not someone's speaking skills, professional training, or cultural power that validates Christian leaders; it's true knowledge of the real God. Jesus, likewise, focused His ministry on humbly serving the needy and embodying a profound God-centeredness.

APPLICATION

1. Theologian and author A.W. Tozer famously wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us [...] Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God."¹ Similarly, the Apostle Paul wrote that we're transformed by "the renewal of [our] minds."² How do wrong thoughts about God or bad theology lead us away from Christ? How do we ensure we're continually renewing our minds to think rightly about the triune God?

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*.

² Romans 12:2.

2. How would you summarize the biblical gospel?
What form do “different gospels” take today?
In other words, how does false teaching about
another Jesus show up in our culture?

Leader help: In his book “Counterfeit Gospels,” Trevin Wax describes the true gospel as a three-legged stool involving the Gospel Story (creation, fall, redemption, restoration), Gospel Announcement (Jesus’ perfect life, substitutionary, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and exaltation/ascension to the throne and future return), and Gospel Community (the church was birthed by the gospel announcement and embodies and spreads the announcement).

Wax goes on to address six modern “different gospels”:

- A. The therapeutic gospel (the problem isn’t sin against God but unrealized potential and a lack of wholeness or happiness).*
- B. The judgmentless gospel (God’s wrath and judgment are downplayed, and Jesus’ death is framed mainly as His victory over the devil).*
- C. The moralistic gospel (Christianity is about good advice and behavior modification/management; redemption becomes about personal willpower to be good).*
- D. The quietist gospel (Christianity is about your personal, private spirituality and has no bearing on public and cultural life).*
- E. The activist gospel (emphasizes social and political transformation so that the church’s unity and mission are built around causes and projects rather than Christ).*
- F. The churchless gospel (the gospel is all about “me and God” and the church is presented as optional, or sometimes obstructive).*

3. Throughout the Bible, God uses marriage imagery to both communicate His love for His people and to challenge the lack of faithfulness He sees in them. Read Hosea 2:16-20; Isa. 54:5-8; and 2 Cor. 11:1-3. If you've trusted in Jesus, God's love for you is like the love between a faithful husband and his wife, even if she's unfaithful. How does meditating on and holding to this reality empower a sincere and pure devotion to Christ?

PRAYER

Praise God for His covenant love for you, thanking Him for loving you even in your unfaithfulness.

Passage to guide your prayers: Hebrews 10:23

Confess to Christ your compromised devotion, admitting how you've been more committed to making money, pleasing others, or seeking comfort or entertainment than you've been to Him.

Passage to guide your prayers: Matthew 6:24

Ask God to protect our group and our church from false doctrine and false teachers.

Passage to guide your prayers: 2 Peter 2:1-3

2 Corinthians 11:16 - 12:10

MAIN POINT

Paul could've boasted in his pedigree, persecution, sacrificial service, or his otherworldly spiritual experiences; instead, he boasts in his weakness, because in his weakness, he finds the strength and power of Christ.

GROUP INTRO

Describe a time in your life when God's grace was sufficient, even though He didn't change your circumstances.

TEXT

1. Read verses 16-28. In verse 18, Paul says he'll boast, but then he lists a bunch of suffering and failures in verses 23-28. Why?

Leader help: As he makes clear in verse 30, Paul is interested in bragging about things that make him look weak so that everyone reading understands that he's not operating out of his own power or greatness, but Christ's. Paul's showing that any power or success in Christianity is due entirely to Jesus working through His people. Additionally, this suffering is proof of Paul's genuine apostleship because it follows the pattern of suffering initiated by Christ; Jesus didn't depend on His own strength, but lived and died in weakness and ministered by the power and presence of the Spirit.

2. Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-7. It's likely that the false teachers in Corinth bragged about their extraordinary spiritual experiences and power. Here, Paul soberly presents his own spiritual experience. How was Paul's own spiritual experience dangerous for him?

Leader help: Despite being an experience that occurred "in Christ" (i.e., this happened when Paul was a Christian and was initiated by God, not Paul), the danger of spiritual pride and arrogance was very real. The Fall has so corrupted us that we're tempted to use even good, godly spiritual experiences for our own glory and renown.

Additional help: There is no other biblical evidence for literal "levels" of heaven. However, there are biblical indications of a heavenly temple and a heavenly holy of holies (see Hebrews 8:5; 12:22). When Paul writes that he was "caught up to the third heaven," he's likely communicating that he was taken into this heavenly holy of holies, into the very presence of God.

3. Read verses 7-10. Why is God's grace sufficient for Paul? What does this mean?

Leader help: Scholar Peter Balla answers like this:


"Christ answered Paul's prayers not by taking away the 'thorn' (v. 8), but by giving him 'sufficient' grace: enough strength to continue serving Christ among many hardships (v. 10). Paul accepted this weakness because Christ worked mightily through this weakness."³

³ Peter Balla, 2 Corinthians, The Gospel Coalition Commentary.

APPLICATION

1. In their book, "The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb," Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel write this: *"Our weakness is seen in three aspects of our condition. First, as human beings we are created finite and temporal and therefore weak and limited [...] Second, each of us has unique areas of frailty, incapacity, and weakness, whether physical, emotional, or mental. Third, we are weak because of our sin. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory [...] In all of this we are called to humbly acknowledge the totality of our weakness and rely wholly upon God for strength."*⁴ If you're willing to share, what are some of your weaknesses, and how have these weaknesses helped you become more dependent upon God?
2. Paul was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble and dependent upon God, showing that pride is a greater threat to us than any pain or suffering we might experience. How have you seen pride bring destruction in your own life or the life of a loved one?

⁴ Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb*, pages 32-33.

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3. One common prayer related to suffering or trials is asking God to take them away. As we see in this passage, this isn't a sinful impulse. But what are some ways we can pursue maturity in our prayers, so that we're able to say with Paul, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities"?

PRAYER

Praise God for giving you all that you need in and through His Son.

Passage to guide your prayers: Ephesians 1:3

Ask God to help you to truly boast about your weaknesses so that His power is obvious in your life.

Passage to guide your prayers: 1 Peter 5:6

Thank God for His sovereignty over all things, including the devil, and ask Him to help you rest in His presence, control, and power.

Passage to guide your prayers: Isaiah 46:8-10

2 Corinthians 12:11 - 13:10

MAIN POINT

Paul essentially says to the Corinthians, "Instead of questioning my leadership or asking if you should follow other leaders, let's turn the attention back to y'all. Examine yourselves; are you in Christ?"


GROUP INTRO

When you hear the phrase 'examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith,' what comes to mind: curiosity, fear, indifference, or something else? Why?

TEXT

1. Read 2 Corinthians 12:11-13, then read Acts 2:22; 2:42-43; 5:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; Hebrews 2:1-4. Based on these passages, what are the "signs and wonders" Paul mentions here, and what purpose did they serve?

Leader help: Signs and wonders = miracles performed by or miraculous gifts given by God (notice the passive tense: The signs...were performed). The purpose of the signs and wonders was to validate the gospel message and the ministry of Jesus' Apostles. Hebrews 2 is especially helpful for understanding the role of these miracles: they were God's way of testifying that the gospel being proclaimed was His gospel. Paul mentions these miracles to remind readers that his ministry and gospel are legitimate.

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2. In verses 14-21, Paul talks like a father to his children. From these verses, how does Paul's ministry to and love for the Corinthians mirror the ministry and love of Jesus?

Leader help: Paul says he refuses to burden the Corinthians, but wants to be like a loving parent providing for their children, much like Jesus doesn't need something from us but provides for our needs because He loves us.

Paul's willingness to be "spent" for the souls of the Corinthians mirrors the much greater love of Christ, who wasn't simply willing to be spent for our souls but was spent, giving His very life for our reconciliation with God.

Like Jesus' ministry, Paul did everything out in the open, in the light, because he wasn't trying to deceive or trick anyone.


Like Jesus, Paul led out of a desire to build up the Corinthians, not to gain something from them.

Like Jesus, Paul is interested in the holiness and obedience of the Corinthians, not because they will earn God's love, but because obedience to God is beautiful and good, benefiting those who, by faith, live in it.

Like Jesus, Paul ministered "in the sight of God," meaning he held God's priorities and assessments above those of others.

3. One of the historical markers of a true Christian church is the presence of loving discipline from the church's leaders. Read 2 Corinthians 13:1-4, 7-10. What is Paul warning will happen when he returns to Corinth?

Leader help is on the next page.



Leader help: Paul is saying that Jesus Himself, who has been working through Paul's Apostolic ministry, will reveal His power through the loving but firm discipline that Paul must bring to those who refuse to repent of their sins (likely the kinds of church-harming sins he listed in 12:20-21). Though Paul appeared to some of the Corinthians as powerless and therefore, illegitimate, Jesus will once again validate Paul's ministry and mission by showing His divine power. If the Corinthians will humbly receive this discipline and actually repent (i.e., "do what is right," v. 7), then they'll be restored (v. 9) and built up in their faith (v. 10).

4. Read verse 5. One of the most stunning realities for Christians is that "Jesus Christ is in you." Why does Paul even question this reality for the Corinthians?

Leader help: Paul writes "unless indeed you fail to meet the test" because he suspects, from interactions with the Corinthians and from the reports he's received, that not everyone in Corinth who claimed to be a Christian actually was a Christian. If this verse is taken out of context, it can be used as a weapon against a genuine believer's assurance of salvation. Paul didn't intend this; instead, he's challenging those who first challenged his ministry. He's basically saying, "I know there are some in your congregation who doubt the legitimacy of my ministry and the gospel I proclaim, but here's my question for you if you're in that camp: was your profession of faith legitimate?"


Everyone who truly trusts in Jesus is "in the faith," and, stunningly, has Jesus in them through the Holy Spirit who indwells all who trust Jesus.

APPLICATION

1. God gives authority to church leaders for the good of His people. How have you benefited from the loving challenges, rebukes, or exhortations of church leaders?
2. Paul's call for the Corinthians to examine themselves has two ditches. On one side is unhealthy self-absorption that damages someone's assurance of salvation. On the other side is apathy toward obedience and holiness. How does the love of Christ help us examine ourselves in a faith-filled, yet honest, way?

Leader help: This quote from Charles Bridges' commentary on Psalm 119 sums it up:

"On what ground is this hope for the Lord's salvation built? On his faithfulness, not on our sincerity; on his promises, not on our frames; on his unchangeableness, not on our constancy. It is built, not on the work of grace in us, but on the work of Christ for us; a work which has satisfied every claim, provided every security, and pledged all the Divine perfections on our behalf; a work so finished and complete, that all the difficulties of salvation on the part of God are removed; and the sinner, finding no hindrance in the way but himself, is warranted, though covered with guilt and defilement, to apply for full, immediate, and unconditional forgiveness...The fullness of Christ, and the promises of God in him, are the only basis of a full assurance of salvation: and this basis is equally firm at all times, and under all circumstances."



3. What areas of your life have been built up by healthy leadership and community in the church?

PRAYER

Pray through Psalm 23, praising God for the ways He's led you in paths of righteousness for His glory.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 23