

## 2 Cor 12:11-18 Expressions of Love for a Troubled Church

**I recently read an article** that reflects the passage we are looking at today. The author, a former pastor wrote:

When we presented some changes [to the church by-laws] that reflected our church's ecclesiology, we were accused of a conspiracy and an intentional attempt to destroy the church. Shockingly, these accusations came from those who had previously been very supportive of the leadership.<sup>1</sup>

I think Paul could easily relate to that same situation. He had a rather tense, strained relationship with the church at Corinth. Although he and his colleagues had served the people well, the false teachers had turned the church against Paul. His enemies were making unfounded, ridiculous accusations against him, and Paul has to respond to these accusations.

Instead of Paul having to defend *himself*, the people of the church should have been defending him. They should have been very thankful and gracious toward the one who had led them to Christ and who started that church. But instead of defending him, some in the church were slandering him and making all kinds of ridiculous accusations.

In many churches, the relationship between the people and the pastor is strained, tense, and somewhat hostile. When that happens, there is usually a small group of dissatisfied people who are causing all the problems. That seems to be the case at the church at Corinth.

In the first section of the text, Paul describes some of the problems in the church. In the second part, he expresses his continuing love and devotion for the people of the church. In spite of the fact that the people didn't show much love for him, he still loved them and wanted what was best for them.

Today we'll look at some of the problems in the church, and then next time we'll consider how a pastor can express his love for a troubled church.

As we look at the first part of the text, we should determine to avoid the problems he mentions. If these problems exist, the church is in deep trouble. If these kind of troubles arise within the church, someone has to stand up and resolve them.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Moore, "I Was Burnt Out—And I Stayed In." <https://www.9marks.org/article/i-was-burnt-out-and-i-stayed-in/>

## I. Evidence of problems in the church

These are signs of a troubled church; if they happen here, we are in deep trouble.

### A. Failure to appreciate/support the pastor

1. .11a The pastor should not have to boast about his own accomplishments.

Paul feels like a fool for mentioning his accomplishments and his suffering for Christ. He felt “compelled” to compare his ministry to the claims of the false teachers. He knew that it was foolish to talk about himself, but he felt obligated to present his apostolic credentials. Paul had to speak up for himself because no one in the church would do so. He would not have had to talk about his accomplishments and his suffering for Christ if the people of the church had stood up for him against the false teachers as they should have.

**App:** It’s a pretty sad state of affairs if a church will not stand up for its pastor against the false accusations of false teachers. It sometimes happens that a small group of dissatisfied people start agitating and causing problems, and the others just stand around and do nothing.

2. The pastor should not have to defend himself against critics.

.11b The people of the church should have stood up in defense against the slanderous charges of the false teachers. They should have “commended” Paul to his adversaries, arguing on his behalf, defending him against false charges.

Instead of defending Paul against these false teachers, the people started following these intruders and turning away from Paul. Paul had to defend himself because nobody else would.

It's a real shame when the people who have most benefitted from the work of a pastor do not defend him from false charges. If something like this ever happens here, I would hope that someone would stand up to defend the pastor if he is not guilty of the charges against him.

*One further note:* If you want to keep a pastor happy and keep him around if he's doing a good job, you should think about "commending" him occasionally. The church ought to recognize what the pastor has done and show their appreciation occasionally.

3. .11end The pastor should not have to compare himself to others. They should have recognized Paul as an "eminent" apostle.

a) .11b He was in no way inferior to the other apostles.

The accusation from the false teachers must have been that Paul was not really an apostle or that he was inferior to the other apostles—the original 12 apostles. Paul rejects that accusation. He was of the same status/ standing as any of them.

b) .11end He admits that he was "nothing."

The false teachers were likely claiming that Paul was "nothing," and Paul agrees; he's nothing in and of himself. Although he's boasted about his accomplishments, he knows he's really nothing. God deserves all the glory for anything he's accomplished.

1 Corinthians 15:10 ... *I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the **grace** of God which was with me.*

2 Corinthians 3:5 *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our **sufficiency** is from God,*

2 Corinthians 4:7 *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the **power** may be of God and not of us.*

Paul accomplished much; he was a great man, yet he always deflected the glory to God and took no credit for himself.

**App:** No matter what our accomplishments, no matter what we do in service for Christ, ultimately, it's all of God's grace, and we deserve no credit. Our trust is in God's grace, power, and sufficiency, not in ourselves. We are nothing; God is everything. John 3:3--"He must increase..."

- c) .12 He had thoroughly and patiently demonstrated “the signs of an apostle” among them. Paul is verifying or authenticating his ministry by describing some of the supernatural aspects of his work. Just like the other apostles, God did great signs and wonders through him. Part of the evidence of Paul’s apostolic authenticity was his ability to do miracles. These miracles marked him off as a genuine apostle.

Acts 19:11 *God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul,*

Romans 15:19 [Paul mentions] *mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God ...*

Acts records many instances of Paul healing the sick, casting out demons, and even raising the dead (Acts 13:11; 14:8–10; 16:18; 19:11–12; 28:3–6, 8). These signs were his apostolic credentials; they authenticated his ministry.

Paul uses three words to describe the miraculous nature of his apostolic ministry:

- (1) Signs (σημεῖον) – a miraculous event with a particular meaning; a sign always points to something. What signs generally pointed to was the truth of the message. Signs verified a message. Paul was preaching the Gospel, and the signs validated that what he was saying was true. The signs authenticated Paul as a true apostle.

Acts 2:22 ... *Jesus of Nazareth, a Man **attested** by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him,...*

Hebrews 2:1–4 *God [was] **bearing witness** both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, ...*

- (2) Wonders (τέρας) – awe-inspiring events, miracles, healings, amazing works that inspired awe or wonder in those who saw them.

- (3) Mighty deeds (δύναμις) – supernatural abilities or powers, miraculous deeds, powerful acts, works displaying divine power; things only God could do.
- (4) .12 These miraculous works were done “among you.” So the people of the church had seen these evidences of apostolic power.
- (5) The fact that these miraculous deeds were the “signs of an apostle” suggest a couple things:
  - (a) Apostles could do these miraculous works because they were representatives of Christ spreading the message of Christ. The signs/miracles verified the gospel message and confirmed that Paul was a genuine apostle.
  - (b) These acts were “wonders” and “mighty deeds” because they were so unusual; average people were not doing such things. The point here is that the false teachers were not doing these things.
  - (c) The presence of these miraculous works should have verified Paul’s claims. The people of the church should have easily distinguished the work of Paul from the claims of the false teachers.

**Quote:** Paul is appealing to God’s working of miracles during his ministry at Corinth as divine [validation] of his apostleship. By the “signs, marvels, and powerful deeds” that accompanied Paul’s service, God was testifying to his authentic [position as an apostle].<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 876.

So there could be no doubt in the minds of the Corinthian church that Paul was a genuine apostle. They had no excuse for neglecting him and following the false teachers.

One of the problems at the church at Corinth was their failure to appreciate Paul or stand up in his defense.

**App:** It's a bad sign when the people of a church will not stand up for their pastor against false allegations. It's often a small group, a small minority that creates large problems for a church, and it's often the majority who says nothing and goes along with the troublemakers.

God highly values peace and unity within the church. In fact, God says that he hates those who create discord among the brethren (Prov 6:19).

No pastor today is an apostle, but if the pastor is doing a good job, the people of the church should have a degree of loyalty to him, and they should defend him against false claims/allegations. If he's attacked for no cause, someone should stand up to defend him.

Sadly, no one did that for Paul.

**Note:** Before going on, I'd like to say a few more things about apostolic sign gifts. Many people today claim to be apostles and many claim to be able to do signs, wonders, and mighty deeds. In fact, some churches claim that such things are supposed to be normal in the life of the church. Some say that these miraculous works are necessary to convince people to believe the Gospel.

If genuine NT apostles like Paul are functioning, then you should expect the signs of an apostle to be done. However, there are no apostles like Paul around today. If modern-day preachers were doing *the same kinds of miracles* that the original apostles were doing, we might believe their claims. But these kinds of miraculous things are not happening regularly, and not in most churches. Claims that such things are happening are usually proven to be fraudulent.

The NT apostles and prophets laid the foundation for the church; and during that time, signs, wonders, and mighty deeds verified their message. Today, our responsibility is the “preach the word,” not do miraculous signs. Paul does *not* tell Timothy or Titus, for example, to impress their people by doing signs, wonder, or mighty deeds. Rom 1:16 tells us that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The Spirit of God uses the word of God to bring people to faith in Christ. We don’t rely on signs, wonders, or mighty deeds to convince people of the truth of the Gospel.

Further, signs, wonder, and mighty deeds are not necessarily convincing (e.g., Lazarus) and they do not guarantee the authenticity of the one doing them. Signs and wonders can be counterfeit and fraudulent.

Mark 13:22 *For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.*

2 Thessalonians 2:9 *The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders*

We certainly do not deny that God still does miracles for his own purposes. “With God, all things are possible.” But we deny that modern-day, self-styled apostles and prophets do genuine, NT miraculous signs, wonders, and mighty deeds. They may claim to be doing miracles, but I simply don’t believe them. Jesus said that an evil and adulterous generation seeks after signs (Mt 12:39).

So we remain unconvinced regarding claims of ongoing signs, wonders, and mighty deeds.

B. Making ridiculous charges pertaining to financial fraud .13, 16

There seems to be two charges against Paul in view here.

1. .13 The first charge seems to be that Paul must be a fraud because he did not charge a fee for his services.

The false teachers were saying that Paul treated the Corinthian church as “inferior” because he did not ask money from them. He served them for free. In that culture, only a fraud or a charlatan would provide valuable services for free. Or at least, that was the claim. The Corinthians would have appreciated him more if he had charged for his ministry.

In an earlier part of 2 Corinthians, Paul explains why he did not request financial support from them—he did not want anyone to think that he was trying to cheat people out of their money. He was not a fraud and he did not want to be a financial burden to them. He had intentionally determined not to charge them for his services.

.13b He (ironically/sarcastically) asks for forgiveness for this “wrong/offense.” Of course, it was not wrong; Paul is being sarcastic here. He’s pointing out the foolishness of their attitude.

2. .16b Second, they accused him of catching them by cunning.

This is a rather puzzling/obscure statement; it’s somewhat unclear what he means, and Paul does not explain himself. He “caught” (λαμβάνω) them “by cunning” (δόλος).

This statement probably represents an accusation from the false teachers.

The word to “caught” is often used in a context of fishing or hunting—i.e., to catch or snare, to deceive, to take in.

The word for “crafty” (πανούργος) could refer to an unscrupulous trickster, a deceptive fraud.

How did he trick them? How did he “catch” them “by cunning”?

The accusation apparently was that he tricked them into contributing to an offering for the poor saints at Jerusalem, when in reality he took that money for himself. I.e., he made a big deal of not charging any fees for his services, but then he sent others to come and collect money that they claimed would be used for the poor saints at Jerusalem, but in reality they’d be keeping this money for themselves. This offering was really just a conspiracy to cheat them. That’s the accusation that Paul repeats here.

This accusation was simply false. There was no evidence of any kind of financial fraud or mismanagement.

2 Corinthians 7:2 ... *We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one.*

There was no financial mismanagement or fraud; Paul was not guilty of any such charges.



**App:** It's not unusual that dissatisfied people in the church make false charges against the pastor; it happens all the time. A small group doesn't like the pastor, so they make up accusations against him or the blow up a small matter out of all proportion. And what's worse, other people don't defend the pastor against the false charges.

Assuming that the pastor is *not* guilty of financial fraud, and assuming that financial matters are in order, the church should not listen to accusations of financial fraud. The Bible tells us not to even listen to an accusation against the pastor unless there are two or three witnesses who can verify the charge (1 Tim 5:19).

One of the reasons we provide regular financial reports is to prevent conflict over money from happening. We must avoid any hint of financial impropriety.

C. .15b Failure to appreciate or reciprocate pastoral love

1. This is a really tragic statement—"the more I love you, the less I am loved." After committing himself to "spend and be spent" for the people, he knows that the sad reality is that the people have little regard for him. He's their spiritual father, but they are unloving children.

I can't imagine how heartbreaking it would be for someone to plant a church, get it up and running, teach the people the truth, and then watch as they turn away from you and embrace error and false teachers.

2. .15b The word for "more abundantly" (περισσοτέρως) means "greatly, excessively, extremely." This could be translated, "Even if I am loving you more exceedingly, I am loved worse." Paul had extraordinary love for these people and had greatly sacrificed himself for them, but sadly, they seemed to have little affection for him.
3. I get the sense of Paul's deep disappointment here. He's doing his best to provide spiritual nourishment and guidance for these people as their spiritual father, but they don't seem to appreciate anything he's doing. As soon as the false teachers arrive, the people start following them instead of following Paul. He loves them dearly and deeply, but they show little regard for him.

4. And the word for love here is ἀγαπάω. He loves them in a godly, sacrificial way, but they don't love him that way. The more he loves them, the less they seem to care about him. They are hardly even friendly toward him; they seem to have little to no affection for him at all. Paul is disappointed if not heartbroken over the people's lack of love for him.

**App:** Some children treat their parents this way. Parents typically sacrifice greatly for the benefit of their kids, and the kids turn around and treat their parents disrespectfully. The children do not reciprocate the love their parents have for them. Parents love more than they are loved in return.

Sadly, some churches treat their pastors this way. Pastors typically sacrifice abundantly/excessively/extremely for the benefit of their church. They work hard and try to be good shepherds of the flock. They endure all kinds of inconvenience and mistreatment for their benefit. Yet in some cases, the people of the church have little or no love or loyalty for their pastor. It's a bad sign when a pastor continually expresses his love for the church, but the church shows little affection for him. It's no surprise when pastors in that condition find another place to go.

Like Paul, a faithful pastor will keep on spending and being spent for the benefit of the people. He'll endure the lack of love and loyalty from them in the hopes that they'll turn around. His primary concern is their spiritual well-being, not his own comfort. He's enduring all this mistreatment for the sake of Christ, not for applause from people. It does not matter much how well the people appreciate him. What matters is if God appreciates his service.

So we persist in ministry in spite of how people respond to us. We don't quit just because we don't feel appreciated or recognized.

The church at Corinth had some troubling problems. They didn't appreciate Paul for who he was or what he was doing, they didn't defend him against false accusations, they falsely accused him over financial issues, and they lacked love for him in spite of his abundant love for them.

Paul, of course, endured this mistreatment. He was not willing to give up on these unloving, disloyal, unappreciative people.

Not too many pastors today would have the endurance of Paul. If a church today is mistreating their pastor in these ways, the pastor will likely not stick around for very long. If the church treats its pastor that way, they'll soon be looking for a new pastor. Many churches today can't keep a pastor for very long because of these same kind of problems.

If we want to avoid these issues, we should make sure to do just the opposite of what Paul is describing here. The church should appreciate and commend their pastor if he'd doing a good job, they should not make or accept false accusations, and they should demonstrate their love for him.

This is what pastors put up with, and it's why pastors often burn out, move to a different church, or quit the ministry. We as a church need to make sure that we do not cause the troubles that Paul mentions here.