

2 Cor 12:19-21 Paul's Priorities and Phobias

In the passage we're looking at today, Paul wonders what the conditions will be when he arrives in Corinth. He plans to visit in the near future (vs. 14a—"I am ready to come to you"), and he wants them to be prepared for that visit. It would be best for everyone involved if they would clean up a bit before he arrives.

In the previous section of the text (12:11-18), Paul accuses the church of a lack of *appreciation* for him. In this section, he accuses the church of a lack of *consecration*, a lack of holiness. Many of them were tolerating sinful attitudes and behaviors and they were not repentant. In this short section, Paul mentions his priorities and his fears regarding the church. His main priority for the church is their *edification*, the Christian growth. But he fears that, when he arrives, he'll find a lot of *transgression* among the people. He fears that he may have to be very bold in dealing with their sin.

These are two very important issues still today—edification and repentance. If we want to grow in the faith, we must repent of our sins.

Let's look first at ...

I. Paul's priorities .19

A. He prioritized God above all else. Pleasing God was his highest goal.

1. The word "excuse" (ἀπολογέομαι) means "to defend against false accusations; to speak on behalf of someone." Of course, the whole book of 2 Cor is Paul's defense of himself.
2. But Paul's primary concern is not defending himself; his real purpose in writing was to "speak before God in Christ." In other words, he's proclaiming God's word to them. His highest concern is God, not defending himself or even pleasing them.

App: The highest priority for the church must always be toward God, not toward people. Of course, the church is made up of people, but the purpose of the church is not to please people or make them feel good. When people and their desires become the central focus of a church, you are asking for trouble. That's one of the big weaknesses of the "seeker-sensitive" mega-church movement—they are often man-centered; their goal is to give the customer what he wants. That attitude often leads to spiritual compromise.

Our focus and attention must always be toward God, not man. Whatever we are doing, it ultimately has its goal and purpose in God. People need to know what God expects of them; that's what the church should focus on.

B. He prioritized Christian growth above other goals. He wanted to promote edification.

1. .19b Notice the word “but.” This points out a contrast. He's not all that concerned about defending himself; that's not his point or goal. His real goal was their edification. Everything he was doing was for that purpose.

2. Edification is the building up of the body. To be edified is to be built up.

After we get saved, we begin the process of edification—we want to grow in the Christian faith. The word refers to the process of building a house. We are like a house being built by a carpenter. God is the carpenter, and he is building us up. Paul and people like him help in this building process.

2 Corinthians 13:10 ... *the Lord has given me [authority] for edification and not for destruction.*

3. “all things” are channeled into the building-up process. Everything that Paul has been doing for the church was for the goal of building those people up in the Lord, helping them grow in the Christian faith.

App: This one verse tells us some very important things about the purpose of the church. The highest purpose of the church is to bring glory to God—“we speak before God in Christ.” The highest concern is communicating God's word. Doing that promotes edification. The primary goal for the church regarding believers is their edification/building up/growth.

We have various programs to help believers grow and mature in the faith. Virtually every event and every meeting that we have is an opportunity to promote Christian growth.

Edification/Christian growth results in changed attitudes and behavior. We put off the old man and put on the new man—that’s the process of edification. We grow in godliness and commitment to Christ. That’s what all the programs and processes of the church are geared toward—edification.

Many churches today have other priorities. They want their people to be happy, to be successful financially, to have strong families, and to be good citizens. While all of that is good, the priority for the church must be the *spiritual* growth of its people—that’s edification. Spiritual growth and well-being is far more important than success in other areas of life.

All of us should be pursuing our own edification. That’s one reason to come to church—to be built up in the faith. And that’s a good reason to make use of the various programs the church offers—SS, pm service. Edification ought to be a high priority for us; we should be seeking to grow in the faith; we should make use of opportunities.

Paul’s main priorities were pleasing God and promoting edification. Those should be our priorities as well, both personally and as a church.

II. Paul’s fears¹ or phobias – the word “fear” is the Gk word *phobos*.

Paul is very concerned about what he’ll find when he shows up at the church. And he has good reason to be apprehensive about this. False teachers had infiltrated that church and gained a following among the people. Theological error had apparently led to sinful behavior. There’s evidence of a lot of sin in the church but not much repentance. So Paul is facing some real problems there at the church, and he’s rather disturbed about the prospect of visiting there again if things don’t change.

Paul mentions three things that he fears.

A. He feared mutual disappointment because of unrepentant sin (v. 20a).

1. *He might not find them* as he wished.

¹ 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), 893.

When he arrives, he might find chaos, conflict, and unrepentant immorality. He wanted them to be godly, mature, self-disciplined followers of Christ. But that's clearly not what they were at this point, and he knew it. So he's very concerned about what their spiritual condition might be when he arrives.

2. *They might not find him as they wished.*

a) They would want him to be lenient, tolerant, gracious. But he's warning them that this may not be a very peaceful visit if they fail to deal with their sins before he arrives. The implied threat here is that Paul may have to be a disciplinarian when he visits.

b) If the church is full of disorder, chaos, and sin, he will not be lenient and tolerant. The church might be disappointed and embarrassed when Paul vigorously exercises church discipline.

This disciplinary attitude is evident in

1 Corinthians 4:21 *What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?*

c) If they put away this sin and deal with it properly, then his visit with them will be peaceful and productive; they'll have a wonderful time of fellowship and mutual encouragement.

d) But if they continue to tolerate sin in the church, then he'll come in like a bull in a china shop. He'll come in with stern discipline and chastisement.

Titus 2:15 *These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority.*

e) So it would be to their benefit if they get rid of the sin before he arrives.

App: It's always in our best interests to repent of our sin before someone else has to step in and deal with it. Don't wait until someone has to rebuke you about your sin. Repent. Cf. the process of church discipline begins with private rebuke. Don't let it get to that point—repent.

B. He feared that he would find sins compromising the *unity* of the church (v. 20b)

1. Paul makes a long list of potential problems in the church. You'll notice that these are all interpersonal problems. They describe the kinds of sins that divide people and produce conflicts. We might call these *sins of the spirit*.
2. And these sins make edification impossible. If these kinds of sins are evident in the church, little or no edification is happening. If these kinds of behaviors are evident among the people, the church will be unhealthy, unspiritual, and divided. Believers cannot grow in the Christian faith if these sins are evident.
 - a) contentions (ἔρις)—hostility, strife, arguments, quarrels, discord, debates
 - b) jealousies (ζήλος)—passion that leads to rivalry
 - c) outbursts of wrath (θυμός)—angry explosions of temper, fury stemming from intense desire, covetousness
 - d) selfish ambitions (ἐριθεία)—hostility, opposition, divisiveness
 - e) backbitings (καταλαλία)—lit. to speak against, to slander, to use insulting language, to voice loud criticism
 - f) whisperings (ψιθυρισμός)—whispered gossip
 - g) conceits (φυσίωσις)—pride, arrogance, a feeling of self-importance, being puffed-up, overblown
 - h) tumults (ἀκαταστασία)—rebellion, revolt, disturbance, chaos, disorder

These are the kinds of attitudes that create divisions within the church. Could you imagine attending a church where all of this is happening? It would be awful.

App: One of the greatest strengths of a church is unity, and one of the greatest weaknesses of a church is division. We must as a church strive for unity and avoid divisions. If we allow these kinds of sinful attitudes, it will spell disaster for the church. These sinful attitudes cause nothing but division, discord, and disunity.

The church must deal very aggressively/boldly with anyone who causes division.

So he feared that the church would be filled with sins that destroy the *unity* of the church.

C. He feared that he would find sins compromising the *purity* of the church (v. 21).

1. .21 Such sins would be humiliating.

He feared “my God will humble me...”

Why would the sinful condition of the church be a cause for Paul’s humility/humiliation?

a) You may recall that Paul had been humiliated by some kind of insulting conflict between himself and the false teachers in the church. If these sins remained, there would be further conflict, which might lead to another awkward interaction between Paul and the guilty people in the church.

b) Further, when a church remains in sin like this, it’s a very poor reflection on the leaders; this kind of sin within a church is embarrassing. This kind of shameful behavior is an embarrassment to the leaders.

Illus.: What do you think of the parents of very badly behaved children? E.g., you see a child throwing a tantrum at the grocery store or restaurant—how embarrassing for the parents. You question whether they are good parents.

If these people claim to be Christians and are still living this way, how shameful and embarrassing that would be; how humiliating for Paul.

Pr 14:34 ... *sin [is] a reproach to any people.*

2. .21b Such sins would be a cause of mourning/sorrow.

a) Paul mourns for these people in particular because he established this church; these are his converts. If they are still living like unbelievers, Paul apparently did not do a very good job in preaching the Gospel to them or teaching them about how to overcome their sins. If these sinful problems remain within a church that had been under Paul’s leadership and teaching for this long, and they are still in this condition, he’d have great sorrow over their continued sinfulness.

App: Most of us know several people who have turned away from the Lord and are living in unrepentant sin. Do you feel a sense of sorrow about them? You should.

b) And note the kind of sins he mentions in vs. 21—these are *sins of the flesh*. These are serious sins. These are the kind of sins that destroy the purity of the church. He says elsewhere that those who commit these sins will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9f).

(1) Uncleaness (ἀκαθαρσία)—filthiness, dirtiness; usually from a moral perspective; dirty in a moral sense

(2) Fornication (πορνεία)—any kind of sexual immorality or perversion

(3) Lewdness (ἀσέλγεια)—lack of moral restraint, promiscuity, licentiousness, sensuality, indecency; flagrant immorality

In some languages the equivalent of ‘licentious behavior’ would be ‘to live like a dog’ or ‘to act like a goat’ or ‘to be a rooster,’ in each instance pertaining to promiscuous behavior.²

Our society today is marked by all of these forms of immorality, especially the flagrant, unrestrained kind of perversion that we see around us. It’s one thing to see that in secular society—it’s very bad, but not unexpected. It’s an entirely different thing to have that in the church. But that’s what Paul was afraid of—that this kind of flagrant immorality was still active within the church.

(4) .21b “many who have sinned” – many had sinned.

The grammar here suggests that they have sinned and are still sinning. And this was true of many of them. Maybe not the majority, but many.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 770.

(5) .21b "... and have not repented." Many had not repented. They are continuing this activity and have not turned away from it.

(a) Repentance is turning away from sin. To repent is to acknowledge such behavior as sinful, feel guilty about it, and turn away from it.

(b) When we are guilty of sin, we must repent of it and forsake it. We must not continue in sin without repentance.

Romans 6:1 ... *Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid.*

As members of the church, we should call one another to repentance. We may have to confront a sinning brother and call him to repentance.

(6) .21end And they had "practiced" these sins habitually.

(a) So he's not talking about people who had fallen to temptation and then repented. There are no Prodigal Sons among these people; they had not turned around.

(b) He's talking about people who had sinned without repentance. I.e., this is habitual, unrepentant sinful behavior that many of them were guilty of.

c) Paul feared that these sins were still active within the congregation. Sin like this within a congregation would be a humiliating source of grief/sorrow. And he knows that he'll have to deal with these sins aggressively and authoritatively.

App: Could this list of sins actually be present in the lives of Christian people? Possibly, yes. In a church full of brand new converts who come out of a very depraved culture, we might expect some of these problems—disunity and immorality may be somewhat common among a group of new converts. But if godly preachers have been teaching in the church for a couple of years, you would not expect this kind of sinful behavior to remain. If it is remaining, it is a poor reflection on both the people and the leadership of the church. If this kind of sin is still evident in the church, it would be a great disappointment and discouragement to Paul.

The assumption is that these kinds of sins should *not* be common within the church. Today, many people carry on this way and think that there is no problem. They claim that Christians can live this way.

If such sins are present within a church, it would be a source of great sorrow and embarrassment. We must get rid of such sins within ourselves and within the church.

Many churches today say very little about sin and repentance. They focus on God's love and mercy, but say little about God's holiness and righteousness. There is little expectation in some churches that people repent of their sins and live righteously. In fact, many churches redefine sin so that people can continue practicing a sinful lifestyle without feeling guilty. Churches today teach that we must tolerate and accept people for who they are and how they behave without judgment or condemnation. I.e. they accept sin as normal.

Illus.: In a recent interview, a pop music star (Katy Perry) who was raised in the church and who used to sing Christian music lamented the fact that she no longer felt comfortable at church because people at church are so judgmental and intolerant. What she wanted was for people to accept her, her beliefs, and behaviors without question or judgment. She wanted to retain her sinful behavior without repentance; she wanted unconditional acceptance of her unbiblical and perverse views. In the interview, she was crying over the fact that the church would not accept her just as she is; they wanted her to change. She saw that as being judgmental. She wanted to retain her sinful attitudes and behaviors and still be accepted within the church.

This popular singer failed to understand that Christianity expects the believer to change and to become more Christ-like. The church cannot tolerate gross immorality among its members. True, genuine faith is always tied to repentance. True faith always results in holiness of behavior. A good tree produces good fruit. If we claim to walk in fellowship with God, then we must walk in the light (1 John 1). We must confess our sins and repent of them; we don't retain them or excuse our sins; we forsake them.

And the church is responsible to discipline people within the church for sins like this. That's not being judgmental. Church discipline is one of the marks of a true church. If a church is operating properly, it will not tolerate this kind of sinful behavior. Any church that tolerates gross, unrepentant immorality within its members ceases to be a biblical church.

Many people today would be happy to come to church if the church never preached against sin. If the church preached only unconditional acceptance of all attitudes and behaviors, then they'd come to church. They want a god who is tolerant, forgiving, and accepting with no questions and no requirements. But that is not the true and living God of the Bible. That is a false god made in man's image.

The proper response to this list of sins is repentance. We must confess them to God, turn away from them, and forsake them.

Proverbs 28:13 He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.

Ephesians 4:22 put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,

If a believer continues to practice sin like this, it is a cause for humiliation and mourning. The leaders of the church may have to sternly rebuke such a person. If the person does not repent, the church has to impose discipline on him. We ought to mourn and be sorrowful at the prospect of church discipline.

The church at Corinth had a lot of problems, and Paul was hoping that they would resolve them before he arrived. They were guilty of sins of the *spirit* and sins of the *flesh*, and they were unrepentant about them. Paul feared what would happen if he arrived and all these sins were still evident among the people. He would have to act in a very authoritative and disciplinary way, which could create more problems. So the best course of action would be for the people there to deal with these sins—repent of them and get them out of their lives.

All of us should be grieved if sin is evident in the lives of the people who attend our church. It's terrible when we hear about a pattern of unrepentant sinfulness in the lives of one of our people. And it's no fun to confront people about such things or impose church discipline. But that's what we have to do; we must call people to repentance and to holy living.

Urging people to repent and change is not judgmental; it's Christian. We get saved by repenting of sin and trusting in Christ. We grow in the Christian life by repenting of sin and trusting Jesus to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Repentance leads to edification and Christ-likeness, which is the goal.

It's always best to repent before someone has to confront you over your sin. 1 John 1:9.

Imagine if Paul wrote us a letter in which he stated his plans to come and visit us. I wonder what we would need to clean up in preparation for his visit. What problems would we want to resolve before he got here? Are there any sins of the spirit or of the flesh that we would need to repent of? Now is the time to repent.

In a certain sense, Jesus visits our church every Sunday. Whenever we gather together in his name, he is with us. So we must make sure that we repent of our sins and forsake them so that we can enjoy fellowship with our Savior.