

o8. 2 Corinthians 10



2 Corinthians 10-13

I find persuasive the opinion of those who state that chapters 10-13 and chapters 1-9 cannot belong to the same letter. While both sections show that the relations between Paul and the Corinthians have been strained, chapters ten to thirteen, as the following chart demonstrates, indicate quite different perceptions by Paul of the circumstances prevailing in Corinth and so of the current state of the relationship between himself and the Corinthian community.

2 Corinthians 1-9

‘You stand firm in the faith’(1:24)

‘I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed’(7:4; see 1:3-7).

2 Corinthians 10-13

‘ *Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith*’(13:5).

2Corinthians 1-9

‘Titus told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me’(7:7).

‘I rejoice because your grief [caused by Paul’s letter] led to repentance’(7:9).

‘What earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter’(7:11).

‘I have complete confidence in you’(7:16).

2Corinthians 10-13

‘If I love you more, am I to be loved less?’(12:15).

‘I fear that when I come, I may find ... that there may perhaps be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder’(12:20).

‘I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me’ (13:10).

2Corinthians 1-9

Paul feels free to encourage them to be generous in the collection for Jerusalem (8-9).

‘With Titus we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news; and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill’(8:18-19).

2Corinthians 10-13

Paul feels need to defend himself against false accusations in reference to his use of money (12:16-18).

‘I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?’(12:18).

In chapters one to nine the prevailing tone is one of relief at the change of heart that Titus found in Corinth, and has just reported to Paul. By contrast, the prevailing tone of chapters ten to thirteen is one of profound hurt and disappointment. The evidence points to chapters ten to thirteen being composed after the earlier chapters. Titus and his companions returned to Corinth late in 55 to get the collection under way again, according to the plan expressed by Paul in 2Corinthians 8-9. However, troublesome 'apostles' had arrived in Corinth in the meantime and had stirred up anti-Paul feeling. Titus met up with Paul somewhere in Macedonia, probably in 56, and reported the deteriorating situation to him, and chapters ten to thirteen are Paul's response (or part of it).

Because chapters ten to thirteen do not belong to chapters one to nine, and because in all likelihood they postdate the earlier chapters, we must avoid using them to throw light on the earlier chapters. It is highly probable that those whom Paul refers to as ‘false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of the Messiah’ (11:13), and as ‘superapostles’ (11:5; 12:11), are not the same as those who were causing the problems in Corinth to which Paul refers in chapters one to nine.

Paul explains to the community the complexities of the apostolic ministry. It is not for himself that he does this; he wants them for Jesus. He is afraid that the personal attack on him will lead to the community drifting not just from him, but from the Good News which he has given them. His ‘anxiety for all the churches’ (II:28) urges him to show the ring leaders up as deceivers. We call to mind the strong words spoken by Jesus against those who claimed to lead the people, but who filled them with fear and cluttered their lives with observances, keeping them from the love of God.

These counterfeit apostles seem to have launched an all-out attack on Paul's personal integrity and authority. They claimed that he lacked their 'spiritual gifts', and that he acted only 'according to human standards' ('**according to the flesh**', 10:3). He may have sounded strong and assured in his letters, but when he came in person '**his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible**' (10:10). Paul keeps insisting that he has never asked for money from them. The troublemakers accuse him of not loving the Corinthians as much as he loves the Philippians from whom he was known to accept financial help (11:7-11). They also accused him of getting money in a roundabout way through the collection which he claimed was for the poor in Jerusalem, but which he was using for himself (12:16-18).

Paul sets out to expose these men and, in his most personal outburst, he pleads with the community which he loves so much, to come to their senses. The fact that Paul spent the winter of 56-57AD in Corinth as a guest of Gaius, and had sufficient peace to be able to compose his Letter to the Romans may indicate that his letter succeeded.

2 Corinthians 10:1-2

I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and clemency of the Messiah — I who am lowly when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! — I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards.

The strong words Paul is about to write should be read in the context of these opening words. It would seem that even his opponents recognised how 'lowly' Paul was when among them.

he is also appealing to them by the 'meekness and gentleness of the Messiah' - virtues which he could not appeal to unless he was confident that they experienced him living these same virtues.

Meekness (πραΰτης)

The virtue of 'meekness' shows itself in the bearing of burdens with strength and gentleness without giving way to impatience.

It occurs in Zechariah 9:9, which is quoted by Matthew in relating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding on an ass (Matthew 21:5).

Jesus speaks of himself as being 'meek and lowly of heart' (Matthew 11:29),

and includes this virtue among the beatitudes: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5).

‘**Clemency**’ (epieikeia) is the virtue of one who has the power to impose sanctions, but who is able to see beyond the letter of the law to its spirit and to exercise clemency.

Lowly (ταπεινὸς)

Humility as lived by Jesus, and by Paul, is essentially the virtue of one who accepts to be a child of God, and who is confident in the love of the 'Abba, Father'. Entrusting ourselves in this way to God's love, we are free to find security in this truth, and not need the kind of security that is looked for in a life of self-reliance. If we are humble, we are free to turn our attention to others, to delight in them, and to invite them, too, to entrust themselves to God in childlike faith. No wonder Jesus said: 'Anyone who brings himself down [like a little child] will be raised up [as by a Father]' (Matthew 23:12). No wonder he replied to his disciples when they asked him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven: 'Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 18: 3-4).

Humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη)

Thinking of oneself as being 'low' (ταπεινος)

Being 'low' has no value in itself, but it does attract God's compassionate love, and it does hold out hope for redemption.

The following text from Isaiah is typical: 'Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his lowly ones (ταπεινος)' (Isaiah 49:13).

Sirach recommends lowering oneself before God: 'They who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared and bow down their souls in his presence' (Sirach 2:17; see also 7:17; 18:21).

Greek moral philosophy, outside the Bible, has no place for ‘thinking of oneself as low’. ταπεινοφροσύνη does not occur prior to Paul. Shortly after him we find it being used by Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus, but always as a vice, never as a virtue. As they use ταπεινοφροσύνη, it is best translated ‘small-minded’ or ‘mean-spirited’. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem.

In the Greek Old Testament the related adjective [ταπεινοφρονος] occurs once: ‘A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is **lowly in spirit** will obtain honour’ (Proverbs 29:23).

The related verb (ταπεινοφρονεω) also occurs only once in the Greek Old Testament, in a Psalm 131 which prepares us for its use in the New Testament: ‘O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed [The Greek reads: ‘I think of myself **humbly**’] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore.’

The following scene from the Gospel recalls Psalm 131: ‘The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:1-4).

The little child is offered as a symbol of humility for it beautifully captures Jesus’ own childlike trust in the God whom he calls ‘Abba! Father!’ He wants his disciples to have a heart that is humble like his (Matthew 11:29). Because Jesus looked up to God in loving trust, he was able to look up to everyone, delighting in people with the delight that belongs to the innocence of childhood and experiencing it as a privilege to serve them.

All this provides the background to the virtue which appears for the first time in Greek in Paul. 'Thinking of oneself as low' (or 'humility') is an attitude of mind and heart that recognises oneself as God's child, sharing the life of his Son, and therefore as living in total dependence on God. The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father and can be absolutely counted on as a source of life, love and hope.

The self held a central place in the ethics of the Greek and Roman moralists, for they thought of their individual nature as sharing in the divinity. The divine in each person was thought of as identified with the self. It was important, therefore, to recognise and respect one's self, and not to think of oneself in a servile way.

For the Christian the divine Spirit which sanctifies the self is not identical with it but is the Spirit of Jesus: 'It is no longer I who live, but the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). To know how to obey the divine will, Christians do not look to their own nature and strive to act accordingly. Rather, they listen attentively to the call of the Lord, and strive to be obedient to one in whose wisdom and love they trust.

The highest freedom experienced by disciples of Jesus is to be his slave, to allow him to live in them and to find in the freedom given by Jesus an opportunity to be 'through love, slaves of one another' (Galatians 5:13). Christians experience a radical and liberating change of perspective: 'If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In this new creature, humility is a basic virtue. Everything now is possible, not to the one who is most self-sufficient, but 'for one who believes' (Mark 9:24). The self is no less important, but perfection for the self is a flowering of the gifts of the Spirit, and the way to this perfection is in self-giving, after the example of Jesus, and by the power of his Spirit. 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33). Humility as a Christian virtue is a sharing in the life of Jesus, the child of God, and in the intimacy of his trust in his Father.

Paul believes that it is Jesus who is living in him and in the Christians to whom he is writing. He wants them to let this special trusting dependence of Jesus on his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would have no difficulty in looking up to others, delighting in their gifts, looking after their interests. Humility for a disciple of Jesus has nothing to do with belittling self. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and a trust that one's self will be created by God's love.

2 Corinthians 10:1-6

I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and clemency of the Messiah – I who am lowly when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away! – I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards.

Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey the Messiah. We are ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete.

Whatever the nature of the opposition which Paul was facing in chapters one to nine, the opponents here are rival missionaries who have come from outside the community (11:4). The nature of their opposition to Paul will become clearer as the letter progresses. The vehemence of Paul's criticism is immediately apparent with his sustained imagery of siege warfare. He is determined to destroy the obstacles which these missionaries in their pride are throwing up against the gospel proclaimed by Paul, and his weapons are not 'merely human' (σαρκικός). We are reminded of similar imagery used by Jesus himself when he said that not even the gates of death itself (Hades) would be able to hold out against the power of the church (Matthew 16:18). Paul is not confident in the obedience of the community (see 12:21; 13:2). When he is assured of it, he will punish anyone who fails to obey. The obedience of which he speaks is, of course, obedience to Christ, but it is shown in acceptance of Paul as the apostle sent to proclaim the gospel to them.

No one with eyes open should have mistaken the meekness of Paul for weakness. He was determined to destroy ‘every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God’. The point of this passage is that his method of destroying that opposition, while it ran the risk of his being accused by ‘stronger’ people of being weak, was in fact his way of imitating his Lord.

In our insecurity, we tend to judge others without sympathy, without understanding, without clemency. It is understandable that we might find it hard to accept our own limitations; but there is no excuse for lashing out at others, either to blame them for who we are or what we do, or to impose on them our own limited judgment. We should pray for the joy to admire others when they excel, to thank God for it; and when they fail, let us recall how little we know of the pressures that have formed them in the past or under which they are now labouring.

2 Corinthians 10:7-8

Look at what is before your eyes. If you are confident that you belong to the Messiah, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to the Messiah, so also do we. Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down (Jeremiah 1: 10), I will not be ashamed of it.

Paul speaks of boasting, a word that he will use over and over throughout this letter. In his First Letter to the Corinthians he was critical of the kind of boasting that was going on in Corinth, and quoted Jeremiah 9:24 which reads: 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord' (1Corinthians 1:31). He will quote this text again shortly (10:18). When towards the end of that letter he spoke about how much he boasts about them, he was careful to add: 'a boast that I make in the Messiah Jesus our Lord' (1Corinthians 15:31).

In his Second Letter (2 Corinthians 1-9) he wrote: 'I often boast about you; I have great pride in you' (7:4) – which explains the sense in which Paul uses the word. He is referring to that in which a person takes pride. Only once did he express pride in an aspect of his own behaviour: 'Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God — and all the more toward you' (2 Corinthians 1:12). He 'boasted' in this way in order to defend his ministry with a view to defending the gospel which he was commissioned to proclaim (see 2 Corinthians 2:14 - 5:19). Everything in the context assures us that this was a boast which he made 'in the Messiah Jesus our Lord'.

This present letter (chapters 10-13 of 2Cor) is full of the kind of 'boasting' which is expressed in the passage just quoted. Paul is ill at ease in doing so, but, faced with the criticism of his detractors, and their false boasting (2 Corinthians 11:12-21) – a boasting which is winning over the Corinthian community – he feels 'forced' (2Corinthians 12:11) to detail the ways in which God has graced him. His motive is expressed well in his earlier letter (2 Corinthians 1-9): 'We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart' (2Corinthians 5:12).

2 Corinthians 10:9-11

I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.' Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.

Paul must assert his authority, for it has been given him by Christ in order to build the community up – something that he has already said can be done only in love (see 1 Corinthians 8:1). He spoke of his weakness and of his lack of rhetorical skills in 1 Corinthians 2:3-4. In both First and Second Corinthians he took some trouble to expound the profound theology of the 'weakness' of the cross, as being God's way of revealing his love. He assumes that here and focuses on exposing the false missionaries.

2 Corinthians 10:12-18

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense. We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you. For we were not overstepping our limits when we reached you; we were the first to come all the way to you with the good news of the Messiah.

We do not boast beyond limits, that is, in the labours of others; but our hope is that, as your faith increases, our sphere of action among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else's sphere of action. "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23-24). For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends.