



When the going Gets Tough

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. At least, that's how it was with the Apostle Paul. BRYSON SMITH leads us through 2 Corinthians, a letter full of tips for Christians who feel like throwing in the towel...

The Appalachian Trail is the longest continuous walking trail in the world. It stretches for over 3,500 kms up the east coast of the United States. Walking the Appalachian Trail is virtually the equivalent of hiking from Sydney to Darwin. It's a long walk.

Each year about 2000 wide-eyed bush walkers set out to walk the Appalachian Trail. Very few make it. Half the walkers don't even make it one third of the way. One in ten of them drop out within the first week. There have even been cases of people who have travelled half way round the world and spent a small fortune on camping equipment but then who have pulled out within three days. They turn up, it would seem, expecting a nice stroll through the woods with the sun shining, birds singing and squirrels playing. But what they get are rocks, mountain climbs, rain, hypothermia, ticks, bears and snakes. It just isn't what they expected.

It all goes to prove the saying: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" It's when things get difficult, when things aren't as easy as you thought they might be, that you see peoples' true spirit come to the fore. That's when you see what people are really made of. It's only when the going is tough that you see a person's true colours.

The going was tough for the apostle Paul when he wrote 2 Corinthians. It is therefore a letter that shows us Paul's true colours. His colours are inspirational.

Background

Paul had started the church at Corinth. You can read about it in Acts 18. Paul went there, preached the gospel and people became Christians. Deep friendships were made, bonds of Christian love were formed. But when Paul moved on, his opponents moved in. They infiltrated the church and started to drive a wedge between the church and Paul. They criticised both Paul and his message.

Slowly but surely the Corinthian church was swayed against Paul. They now started to believe that Paul was worldly and insincere, that he was a coward, that he was weak, a theological deviant who preached a deficient gospel because he didn't stress the Old Testament laws enough. They began to think of Paul as an impostor, a false apostle, someone who was corrupt, only in the religion business to exploit people - someone who talked tough in his letters, but face to face was just a wimp. To the Corinthians Paul was either a fool or else crafty, deceitful and not to be trusted.

And all this came from a church that Paul had poured his life and soul into. All this criticism from people Paul knew and loved, who he had nurtured in the faith. It tore the heart out of Paul's chest. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to try to rectify the problem, and rebuild the bond between himself and the Corinthian church.

Key Themes

For the most part the letter concerns specific issues over which Paul has been criticised eg his failure to visit, his practice of not taking money, his weak and unimpressive manner. Paul works through all these issues with transparent love for the church and for Christ. In particular three key themes reappear time and time again. When the going gets tough....

1) ...God gets tough.

God's strength is shown all the more profoundly when we are at our weakest. God's power is not most clearly seen in miracle performing, visions, eloquent speeches or powerful personalities. When we are tired and sick and distressed,

when we don't know how we're going to keep going, but yet we do somehow hang on - that's when God is seen!

2) ...true love gets tough.

Genuine love for people shows itself in risk taking, sacrifice and a preparedness to say the hard things. In his book, *Bold Love*, Dan Allender comments that if Christ had loved us the way we love each other, He would never have been crucified. It's a sobering thought. We love one another in a way that tends to never rock the boat. Christ loves us enough to disturb us and unsettle us and confront us. Sometimes that's what it takes to make someone the best person they can be. It's what Paul is prepared to do in 2 Corinthians.

3) ...faith gets tough.

We should see the importance of the gospel so clearly that we will be prepared to even go to extreme measures to protect our faith. Nothing is worth drifting away from Jesus for.

Preaching Plan

2 Corinthians is an outstanding epistle to preach on. It continually draws into question the way we see the world. It highlights the importance of staying loyal to Christ, it undermines the "success and power" mentality of our society, and questions the weak, insipid way we often love one another.

I choose a preaching plan of 12 talks. This required several talks to be based on quite large amounts of material (eg ch 8-9). The advantage of this was that certain "purple patches" were able to be seen in their pastoral context. For example the classic statement of 2 Cor 1:20, in which Paul states that all the promises of God find their "yes" in Christ, has so many theological implications that it could fill a sermon by itself. In context however, the verse is deeply pastoral. Paul uses it to help explain why he failed to visit the Corinthian church when he had said that he would.

Talk plans and outlines follow on the remaining pages.

Resources

I made use of the following:

Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians* (BST)

Carson, *From Triumphalism To Maturity* (IVP)

Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC)

All were an excellent help.

Talk 1

THE GOD OF ALL COMFORT

2 Cor 1:1-11

1.0 THE PAIN OF REJECTION

This talk opened with a description of a particular family we knew who had been through the heartache of a child running away from home. The point: there are few things more painful than someone you love turning their back on you. That's what the apostle Paul was going through with the Corinthian church. So Paul decided to write 2 Corinthians to defend both himself and his message from the criticisms of his opponents.

2.0 THE COMFORT OF GOD

Even within the despair and hurt that Paul felt concerning the Corinthians, he can see that God has been sustaining and comforting him. In these opening verses he describes how this has happened.

3.0 GOD COMFORTS US...

a) ...through Jesus (v5)

Our fellowship and unity with Christ means that we also share in his sufferings. This probably involves more than persecutions. It's also the anxiety that comes from being passionate about the Kingdom. The sleepless nights worrying about a brother or sister in Christ who is falling away and you're at your wits' end to try and bring them back. The hurt that can come from being misunderstood by someone, when in all honesty all you're trying to do is help them follow Jesus. The anger you can feel when a false gospel is preached. The frustration you feel when people don't seem to want to take Jesus seriously enough. This is what Paul was going through with the Corinthian church.

But it's not so much the sufferings but the comforts that we share with Christ that is Paul's focus. The reason for this comfort is not expressly stated here, but an important one (which will develop as the letter goes on) is the comfort of knowing that we are contributing to something of eternal worth (v9). It may hurt at times, but gospel work will last forever.

b) ...using other Christians

God comforts and encourages us through Christ, by using each other. Paul is helped by the Corinthians' prayers for him, and in turn many others will be encouraged (v10-11). God's encouragement is something to be passed around. If you have been comforted in your life by God, that's something to be shared because it is precisely by our sharing with each other, that God will bring his comfort (v6-7).

4.0 WE ARE IMPORTANT TO EACH OTHER

Some of us have learnt things that others have yet to learn. Some of us are going through sufferings now that others have

already been through. Any comfort through Christ we have received, any lessons we have learnt, any encouragement we have obtained, is meant to be shared.

For even through our stumbling efforts of help, even when we do struggle for the right words of counsel, even when we feel awkward and don't know what to say, God can still be powerfully at work as the comfort that comes from Christ is shared.

Talk 2

STINKING CHRISTIANS

2 Cor 1:12-2:17

1.0 WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH...

When the pressure is on, that's when you get to see the true spirit of someone (see intro to this article). That's what makes the section of 2 Corinthians so interesting. The going is getting tough for Paul and so his true emotions and priorities come to the surface. And it's very inspiring! First, though, what exactly is making it tough for Paul here?

2.0 THE SPECIFIC CRITICISM OF PAUL
Essentially the problem is that Paul did not visit Corinth when he'd said that he would. When he left at the end of a previous painful visit to Corinth, Paul had indicated that he would try and visit them again on his way to Macedonia. But he didn't. Instead he wrote them a letter. This gave ammunition to Paul's opponents who were saying that Paul and his message were fickle. It's quite a complicated section in many ways, but essentially the linking thought is Paul's response to criticism over him not visiting them.

3.0 PAUL'S RESPONSE

a) his conscience is clean.

After lots of soul searching and honest self-examination, Paul says he really was trying to do the right thing (1:12-17). He really had intended to visit them again. Indeed Paul wants the Corinthian church to know that both he and his message are based on faithfulness (1:18-22).

b) his concern was for them

Paul decided to not visit because he came to firmly believe that it was better for the Corinthians if he didn't. Paul's earlier visit had not gone well, and so after he had left he decided that a letter rather than direct personal confrontation was what was needed (2:1-3).

Paul's failure to visit wasn't out of revenge, or to get even. This is evidenced by his forgive-and-forget attitude to a previously troublesome fellow (2:5-10).

c) this criticism comes from the nature of the gospel.
In the midst of all this tension and misunderstanding about him not visiting

them, Paul wants the church to be on their guard, he wants them to be not quite so naïve, and to realise this sort of conflict is popping up not because of anything Paul's done, but because of the effect that the gospel has on people (2:12-17).

Ironically, therefore, in all this antagonism and divisiveness, God is actually leading a triumphal procession, because the conflict is actually a sign of the gospel at work (2:14).

4.0 PASSION AND COMPASSION

What shines through this section is Paul's passion for the gospel and therefore his compassion for people. Paul doesn't get resentful or vengeful over the pettiness of it all. He simply works through the whole thing so as to explain that he loves them, and because he loves them, he's been trying to what ever is best for helping them to follow Jesus. Do you share Paul's passion for the gospel and compassion for people? You can tell your true motives by what you're like when the going gets tough. Wouldn't it be lovely to be able to say with Paul, "This is our boast. Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the holiness and sincerity that are from God."

Talk 3

WHY SETTLE FOR SECOND BEST?

2 Cor 3

1.0 THE GREAT PLATYPUS HOAX

When Europeans first settled in Australia one of things that amazed them was the strangeness of our fauna. So weird was the Platypus that they sent a skeleton back to England for examination and comment. Back there in the mother country, they decided that it must be a hoax. It was all too new for them to cope with.

In the days of the early Christian church that is also what happened with the gospel. The gospel was so different from what people were used to that they were suspicious of it. Some people at Corinth were suspicious of this new sounding gospel. Indeed in ch 2, Paul finished off by saying that the very message of the gospel irritates some people. With that thought in mind, in ch 3, Paul now moves to take on his opponents in a more direct way. Having spent ch 2 defending himself, in ch 3 he now goes on the attack.

2.0 PAUL VERSUS HIS OPPONENTS

a) better commendations

Paul's ministry has more to commend it than that of his opponents. Paul hardly needs letters or references for the Corinthians, because he can point to the church itself (v1-3).

b) better confidence

Paul has confidence in his ministry because it's God who has been doing it (v4-6).

c) better covenant.

Paul's ministry is based on a new covenant, which is far superior to the old covenant that his opponents are into (v7-11). Paul explains this with quite a complicated section all about a veil that Moses used to wear over his face. Paul picks up that imagery to say two related things. Firstly he says, "Look we don't veil our message because the glory of the new covenant doesn't fade for a start" (v11-12). Secondly Paul goes on to say that, "Just like that veil stopped Israel seeing God's glory fading on Moses' face, a lot of people still have a sort of mental veil, which stops them seeing the way that the old covenant's glory fades in comparison to Jesus (v14-15)." Paul is of course having a big dig at his opponents.

3.0 DON'T BE VEILED

Paul is going head to head with these people who are trying to promote themselves to the Corinthian church with their achievements and their letters of recommendation. They're trying to get the Corinthians to go back to the OT and start following rules and regulations. Paul says forget it, it's all old hat. Don't leave Jesus behind to go back to rules and regulations. That will only bring condemnation and death. Christ brings transformation and freedom. Walk into some churches and you'll be told that you need to talk in tongues, or that you need to tithe or that you need to experience a special type of church ceremony. Walk into some church buildings and there are all these people in funny clothes called priests walking around in parts of the building where you're not allowed to go because God lives up that end of the building. It's all OT, and it's all been done away with. It can all seem so serious and religious and pious... but it is promoted by people whose minds are veiled - people who can't see the surpassing glory of Christ's new covenant.

Talk 4

POWER IN WEAKNESS

2 Cor 4

1.0 SUCCESS!

If you want to be a success in the world, charisma would help. Intelligence? A bit of money may help? Good management skills? Public speaking ability? But what makes a successful Christian? Last talk we saw that in Chapter 3 Paul was on the attack. He compared his gospel with that of his opponents. In ch 4 Paul shifts his focus from the gospel, to the messenger of the gospel. In particular

he defends himself from three main accusations.

2.0 PAUL IS INSINCERE

Paul doesn't trick people into becoming Christians by tampering with the Word of God (v1-2). It's inappropriate for us to trick people into coming to a meeting and not tell them that the gospel will be preached. It's inappropriate to tell them half the gospel, invite Jesus into your life and everything will be OK. A common trend today is to pump up people's emotions and hype them up to get them to make a decision. There is no place in true gospel work for any of those things. True ministry is setting forth the truth plainly. You don't need to add to it to make it fancy.

3.0 PAUL IS UNSUCCESSFUL

Yes our Gospel is veiled to some people, but just because people don't become Christians, doesn't mean our ministry is unsuccessful (v3-4). Paul has the task of telling people the gospel, not of making them believe. It is God who allows people to understand it (v4-6).

4.0 PAUL IS WEAK AND UNIMPRESSIVE

On this issue, Paul would agree with his opponents! But God deliberately chooses to use weak people to show that it is God at work, not them (v7). Paul goes on in verses 8-11 to flesh out how it is that God's power is displayed in his weakness.

God gives Paul the endurance to persevere as he suffers for Jesus, and the security that he will never be abandoned. Not only that, the suffering is actually part of Paul's ministry as an apostle. Through Paul's suffering, the gospel is advanced.

5.0 PAUL AND US

We are messengers of the gospel, and often people don't respond to our message, and we can lose heart. We need to remember that it's only God who can switch the lights on. Which means we need to pray! It's not up to us to change people, it's up to us to persevere in telling them the gospel, and to be praying that God would change them.

On the other hand, you might be the type of person who is sitting thinking "What possible gifts do I have, that could help in the spread of the gospel." Do you look around and see people who are more outgoing than you? Do you see other people that have their life together more than you do? Do you feel inadequate for the task of telling others about Jesus? Do you come away frustrated with opportunities that come up where you just didn't say anything? Do you come away from a conversation thinking about things that you could

have said better?

Do you feel weak, unimpressive. Well God want's people just like you!

If you're weak and inadequate... you're just the type of messenger God chooses. So persevere, and be encouraged that God wants to use weak people like us!

Talk 5

SEEING THE UNSEEN

2 Cor 5:1-10

1.0 THAT TOWEL THROWING FEELING

Do you ever feel like giving up as Christian? If ever there was a time that Paul was under pressure to give up, it was at this time in his ministry (1:8). Why was it that the apostle Paul didn't lose heart? It's because he sets his sights on what is unseen (4:16-18). In Chapter 5 Paul explains what the unseen things are.

2.0 THE UNSEEN HOME.

Paul's assurance is, that if he dies, he has something far better awaiting him (v1-4). Our body's only a tent. It's temporary. What does Paul do in the meantime? He wants to have his heavenly house. Indeed it's natural for us to groan, because we were made for our new homes (v5).

3.0 THE UNSEEN JUDGEMENT

We all must give an account to Jesus for the way we have lived. And we will all receive what is due to us. So Paul's goal is to please him (v9-10). What do you devote your life to?

4.0 KEEP ON KEEPING ON

On the outside Paul suffers wear and tear, but look what happens when Paul fixes his sights on what is unseen. When he compares his sufferings to what is to come, he describes them as light and momentary troubles. When he weighs the two up, His troubles are leading to an eternal glory that overbalances the scales! The two are beyond all comparison. And when you think about the hardships that Paul was facing, it must mean that heaven is pretty fantastic! Do you feel like giving up because life as a Christian just gets too hard? Do you get opposition from family members because you try to invite them to Christian things? Set your sights on what you can't see. And as you suffer for the gospel in this life, you are building up immeasurable glory for the next!

Talk 6

COMPELLED BY LOVE

2 Cor 5:11-6:2

1.0 THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE

Love can cause people to do some pretty radical things. Maybe love has motivated you to do some significant things. Maybe love for your children has caused

you to sacrifice certain things so that you can afford to give them music lessons or send them to uni or... The second half of 2 Cor 5 is all about being motivated by love. It's about how the apostle Paul was motivated by Christ's love for people. Paul has finished answering specific criticisms about himself. He now wants the church to see him for what he really is.

2.0 "CHRIST'S LOVE COMPELS US" (v14)

Verse 14 is pretty much the centre-piece of this section. There's actually a bit of a twist in those words, isn't there? Paul doesn't say, "my love for people compels me to tell them the gospel." It's Christ's love which compels him. Because Paul can so clearly see how much Christ loved people, he also is compelled to want the same.

3.0 THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Paul goes on explain the extent of Christ's love and what it was that Christ's love achieved. Three key ideas stand out.

a) one died for all (v14bf)

These verses are tapping into the idea that Christ's death, substitutes for the death of those who follow him.

b) new creation v17

Christ love creates a whole new creation.

c) reconciled to God (v18-19)

My daughters would never let a grub crawl up their arm. The thought of a creeping crawling caterpillar edging up their arm, yuk, they'd run a mile. But they love having a butterfly land on them! That's the way it works with God and us. There's no way a holy God can have fellowship with sinful people, but He can with new creations.

4.0 PAUL IS COMPELLED TO....

Jesus' love is so impressive so powerful that Paul is compelled to...

a) persuade (v11)

How could you not tell people the way they could be reconciled to the God who created them and who in the end will judge them?

b) ambassador (v18-20)

Paul sees himself as an ambassador of Christ. So important is the gospel that everything he does, the way he speaks, drives his car, pays his tax, acts at work, treats his family, the sort of jokes he tells, the movies he watches, the magazines he reads, its all for the sake of helping people be reconciled to God.

4.0 PAUL AND US

What about you? Are you living for the same things that Christ died for?

Do you understand how much it matters to Christ that people be reconciled to God? Do you realise that you have

never locked eyes on another human being who isn't valuable to God? The girl who served you at the supermarket this week, the guy in the slowing moving car in front of you, the neighbour with the barking dog, the person at work who rubs you the wrong way, the relatives you dread visiting, the teachers at school. All of them are incredibly valuable to Christ. Are they valuable to you?

Talk 7

EXTREME MEASURES

2 Cor 6:1-7:1

1.0 "WHO DARES WINS"

What would be prepared to do to get \$20? Would you drink a milkshake made out of sheep blood for \$20? What about \$50? Would you eat a peeled lemon in 15 seconds for \$50? What about \$500? For \$500 would you jump from a burning two story building onto a fire blanket held by volunteer firemen?

That's exactly the sort of thing that happens each week on the TV show "Who Dares Wins." Here's another "Who Dares Wins" for you to think about. What would you be prepared to do in order to safeguard your relationship with Jesus? In ch 5 Paul explained how Christ's love compelled him to want people to be saved. In ch 6 he goes on to make the related point that we ought to be prepared to go to extreme measures to stay close to Jesus (v1-2).

2.0 THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL (v3-10)

So valuable is Jesus that Paul goes to extreme measures to make sure people hear about him! Irrespective of how much trouble he gets into or what people think of him or the hard discipline of seeking to be godly or the sleepless nights, Paul does it all because Jesus is so important. He'll go to extremes to ensure that no stumbling block hinders people having a relationship with Jesus.

3.0 AN APPEAL TO THE CORINTHIANS

a) draw close to Paul (v11-13)

Paul is broken hearted at the way the Corinthians are treating him. His pain is two fold. Firstly there is obviously the pain of personal rejection. But secondly Paul is troubled because as they turn from him, they are also turning from the gospel.

b) pull away from unbelievers (v14ff)

Now these verse are often quoted as a reference to not go out or to marry a non-Christian or go into business with a non-Christian. Well, there may be implications for those sorts of situations, but what we need to see is that here in context these verses are not directly talking about those sorts of situations at all. Paul is actually talking about false

teachers in Corinthian who are teaching a false Jesus. They will lead the church astray and so Paul urges them to stay away from such people. No matter how impressive they seem, they are polluting the church.

4.0 DO WHAT IT TAKES

The lesson in all this is that we should see so clearly the great importance of the gospel that we would be prepared to even go to extreme measures to protect our faith and the faith of others! I know of people who have had their marriage partner walk out on them because they've become a Christian but they have chosen to stay with Jesus. People who have lost the respect of their children because they've become Christians, but they have chosen to stay with Jesus. People who have given up non-Christian boyfriends and girlfriends whom they have cared deeply for. People who have literally given up millions of dollars for the sake of pursuing full time ministry. People who have suffered sickness and anxiety and nervous breakdowns for the sake of the gospel. And in each case they have been right to do so. For nothing matters more than a faith in Jesus Christ. Do you see that? Well then be prepared to go to extreme measures for the sake of the gospel. Nothing is worth leaving Jesus behind for.

Talk 8

BOLD LOVE

2 Cor 7:2-16

1.0 "THIS IS GOING TO HURT ME MORE THAN IT HURTS YOU."

"This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you." I guess most of us have heard that saying at some stage. I say it under my breath as I give our little boy his Ventolin for his asthma. He starts crying as soon as the little mask comes near him. I feel like a traitor. All he sees is me doing something to him which he doesn't like. He doesn't understand it's for his good. That is the sort of thing that's happening in 2 Cor 7. Paul has hurt the Corinthians, but he wants them to know that it hurt him to do it. But he did it anyway because he felt that it was needed in order for the Corinthians to grow into the best disciples of Christ they could be.

2.0 PAUL'S SEVERE LETTER

a) 2 Cor 1-2 revisited

Back in ch 1 & 2, Paul went into a lot of detail, defending his decision to not personally visit the church at a time when they were expecting him. Instead he wrote them a severe letter.

b) a severe letter written out of love (v2-

4) Paul wants the Corinthians to realise that that severe letter he wrote was one of those extreme measures (cf ch 6) which Paul was prepared to go to, out of love, because he didn't want them to receive God's grace in vain.

c) Paul's worry over the letter (v5)

Paul had written the letter in Ephesus, sent it off with Titus and then he had headed off to Macedonia. Things were tough for Paul in Macedonia, but they were made all the worse because he was worried about the letter. You know that feeling, when you've written a letter but as soon as you've dropped it in the mail box, you wished you'd never sent it. Paul was a bit like that with this letter.

3.0 THE CORINTHIANS RESPONSE

Titus had returned with good news. The letter had had the desired effect. Yes it had caused sorrow; yes, they'd been upset when they'd read, but it had caused them to lift their game (v6-12). Verse 12 pretty well sums up the chapter. Paul didn't write the severe letter out of revenge. Paul's primary motive was to test the church, to rattle their cage enough to get them to realise their love for Paul and therefore their devotion to his message, the gospel. It was a risky thing to do. Paul knew it was risky, that's why he fretted so much over it. But the nice thing is that it all worked out (v13-16).

4.0 TOUGH LOVE

I think we're seeing an important point here don't you? It's the lesson that sometimes love needs to be tough.

We're not used to this idea.

Because we are so dedicated to personal happiness and comfort, we tend not to rock the boat in our relationships. We shy away from things that might cause tension, or offend people or get someone offside. We call all this "respecting the other person" or "being polite" and "having manners" or being "unconditionally accepting". But in the end it is selfishness. Pr 27:6 tells us, that "the wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Let's be a church family who love each other enough to also do that when we need to. Let's care enough about each others' relationship with God that we'd be prepared to take risks in our friendships. Let's have a love that is sensitive yes, but which is also bold.

Talk 9

PUTTING MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS

2 Cor 8-9

1.0 MONEY MATTERS

How much did you put in the plate this morning? Was it just whatever you

found in your wallet? Twenty dollars? Five dollars? Twenty cents? How much? Maybe you think it's rude that I'm even asking the question! Very clearly, different people can have quite different levels of sensitivity when it comes to the topic of money. However, whereas some of us may have hang-ups talking about it, Paul doesn't!

2.0 THE SITUATION

a) the Jerusalem collection

These chapters revolve around a collection that Paul is getting together, to help out the church in Jerusalem.

Firstly, it was to help out with a pretty bad famine that Jerusalem was having. But secondly, this collection was also to strengthen the unity between the Jewish church in Jerusalem and the other gentile churches that Paul had planted.

b) generous Macedonians.

Paul is writing from Macedonia. The verses give a lovely picture of the Macedonians pleading to Paul to be able to give money away (8:1-4). This prompts Paul to write and ask the Corinthians to do the same.

c) tightfisted Corinthians?

[10-11]. The fact that Paul is urging them there to finish the work they began, may imply that the Corinthians were being a bit slack with this collection

(8:10-11). Willingness alone is no substitute for actual money (8:12).

d) the pickup arrangements

Paul is very eager for the collection to be handled with care so as to not leave even the possibility of accusations about someone pocketing the money for themselves (8:16-24).

3.0 SOME LESSONS FOR US

a) giving is a matter of liberty

Paul says that he's not commanding them anything here and that they shouldn't act of a sense of compulsion. There are no set laws about giving. There is no fixed amount that God requires. Giving is a matter of liberty (8:8, 9:7).

b) giving is a test of sincerity

One test of whether you really think that Jesus is important, and that gospel work is really important is how much money you'll put towards it. One test of whether you really love the other people in this church is whether you're prepared to spend money on them! (8:7-8)

c) give cheerfully and generously

Because our giving is a reflection of our sincerity, Paul therefore urges cheerfulness and generosity in the Corinthians (9:6-7). Paul quotes Christ as an example [8:9]

d) generosity gives more opportunity for generosity

Indeed the really exciting thing about

all this is; that if we do give generously, God will help us grow in true riches (9:8-11). Money actually becomes something that can help us grow in godliness by giving it away.

4.0 MONEY: AN ALTERNATIVE GOD OR AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GODLINESS

Paul puts a novel, more positive spin on money, which you don't find so much in the remainder of the NT. Sure, don't make money into an alternative god, but in a more positive light, money is great, because money can actually be an opportunity for growing in godliness. It's just a matter of giving it away - being generous with it. For when we are; when we're cheerful generous givers, all grace will abound with us. We will not only have all that we need but we will abound in every good work, we will be rich in every way so that we can be generous on every occasion.

Talk 10

SEEING THINGS GOD'S WAY

2 Cor 10

1.0 "BUT OFFICER, EVERYONE ELSE WAS GOING THE WRONG WAY!"

Seventy year old William Moylan took his wife for a drive from Hornsby in the North of Sydney, up to Gosford on the Central Coast. The only trouble was that William took the wrong turn onto the F3 freeway, and so for almost 50 kms William Moylan drove north but in the southbound lane. And what's more the poor old fellow couldn't understand what the problem was with all these other drivers. Literally 100s upon 100s of cars all going the opposite direction to him. He tried flashing his lights at them but they still wouldn't turn round.

Twice the police tried to flag William down, but he sailed straight past them. He wasn't doing anything wrong and so they were obviously trying to attract someone else's attention. The police weren't convinced though, and so now William Moylan doesn't have a driver's license any more. And I think we're all pretty pleased about that! What William Moylan discovered was that no matter what we might think, sometimes it's someone else's judgment that actually carries more weight. This is what Paul wants the Corinthians to understand in 2 Cor 10. Paul wants the church to understand that irrespective of how important and impressive certain false teachers may seem, in the end it's not their opinion that really matters. It's God's assessment of things that really matters. It's God's commendation that matters most.

2.0 A RETURN TO A FAMILIAR TOPIC

The letter very abruptly swings back to the issue of false teachers. It might be

that Paul has just received some bad news about how the church is going.

3.0 I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO BE BOLD BUT... (v1-6)

The problem is that people are judging Paul by the wrong standard. They are criticising Paul by the way the world does things, but that's not how Paul operates (v2-4). Paul now goes on to offer two pieces of evidence to show that God has used his ministry.

4.0 LOOK AT THE FACTS

a) we belong to Christ as much as they Paul's no less an apostle just because he doesn't push his weight around.

Check out the facts. Paul was patient and forbearing and long suffering. And people were converted (v7-11).

b) our appropriate field

The false teachers want to steal glory from Paul. All the hard yards, all the heart breaking gospel work, all the rejection and the hassles that Paul has been through. And now when the going is so much easier, they want to ride on in, and steal peoples' hearts with big talk and showmanship and letters of commendation (v12ff).

4.0 SEEING THINGS FROM GOD'S POINT OF VIEW

In many ways verses 17-18 capture the tone of the entire chapter. It's God's commendations that matter most, it's God's opinion that matters, it's God's opinion of things that carries the most weight. Which is both comforting, but also challenging. It's comforting in the sense that it should motivate us in our ministry to other people. Much of gospel ministry can seem so unimpressive by the standards of this world. But God sees it as incredibly valuable.

The challenge is; Do you think God would commend you? You may have all the people skills that the world thinks are important. Everyone else may think you really have it all together. What does God think?

Talk 11

BOASTING IN WEAKNESS

2 Cor 11:1-12:10

1.0 FOOLISHNESS & SUPERCHRISTIANS

You'll find them in church after church. Big talkers who pride themselves as spiritual super-Christians. They were in Corinth too. Talking Paul down and talking themselves up. And the Corinthian church has gone all starry eyed and have been swayed by all this triumphal and positive and persuasive and entertaining type speech. Paul for his part is utterly repulsed by that sort of approach. Yet at the same time, this problem in Corinth is backing Paul into a corner. Throughout this letter Paul has

repeatedly insisted that self-praise is worthless. Yet things at Corinth seem so desperate that Paul may have to stoop to boasting about himself if he is going to preserve the church. If it is big talk that seems to sway the Corinthians, if boasting is what influences them, then, as much as he hates it, as much as he thinks it is foolishness, Paul is willing for the sake of his converts, to engage for a few moments in a conduct which he regards as distasteful (v1).

2.0 PAUL'S JUSTIFIED BOASTING

So distasteful does he find the idea of self-promotion, that he takes 20 verses just working up to it. And basically Paul's justification for boasting is two-fold.

a) Paul's love for the church (11:2-6) Paul cares too much to stand idly by while the church is led astray. He will do anything to get them back. He's even prepared to enter into what he considers foolishness.

b) the church has mistaken servanthood for insignificance (11:7ff). When he was establishing the church, Paul refused financial help from the new church. The false teachers were saying, "Hey Paul can't be much chop. He's a freebie. He can't be a very good apostle." It's the old, "this brand is more expensive than that brand therefore it must be better" type of thinking. They have mistaken Paul's servant-nature as a measure of insignificance.

3.0 PAUL'S BOASTING

a) his reservation to boast (v16-21) Finally Paul draws in a big breath and starts to say the sorts of things that he hates to hear.

b) his heritage (v22) Paul is boasting! Quick someone, get a camera because you won't see this sort of thing very often!

b) his achievements (?) (v23-29) No longer is he his opponents equal - "Are they Hebrews? So am I" - now he insists that he is superior. "Are they servants of Christ? I am more." But also there's now a lovely little twist to this whole argument. At this point you'd expect Paul to go on and talk of his successes but instead he talks about his sufferings and his losses and his defeats.

c) his weaknesses (v30ff)

With wonderful irony Paul reaches the climax of the whole letter. "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." Why? Well, because it is in our weakness that God is at his strongest. He explains two specific weaknesses. The time he ran away from Damascus (11:30-33) and "a thorn" that God hasn't removed for him despite all the other wonderful things he'd seen and performed (12:1-10).

4.0 WHEN I M WEAK, THEN I M STRONG

Boasting is foolishness. Boasting only shows that you don't understand the gospel. For the gospel is all about God being strong when we are weak.

Talk 12

THE SERVANT APOSTLE

2 Cor 12:14-13-14

1.0 THE LAST PITCH OF THE DAY

It was the last pitch of the day. Australia was playing the United States in women's softball and things didn't look good. America had gone into the game red-hot favourites. Australia had never ever beaten them. Indeed America had only lost one game in the last 10 years! The US was leading 1-0 and it was the last pitch of the day. Australia was at bat, they had a runner on 2nd, but they already had two batters out and their current batter up already had let two strikes against her. Whatever happened, it seemed likely that this was going to be the last pitch of the day. It would either be hit for a homerun and Australia would win, or the game was over, and Australia would lose. Joanna Brown crunched that last pitch for a home run in one of the most memorable moments of the Atlanta Olympics - a victory from the jaws of defeat. The apostle Paul is hoping for a similar outcome with the church at Corinth. The Corinthians are up to bat but they already have 2 strikes against them. Twice before Paul has visited this church and each time he has found them to be in an absolute mess - factions, divisions, false teachers. And it doesn't seem to be getting any better. Now a third visit is being planned. This one will either make or break the church.

2.0 PAUL'S THIRD VISIT

a) Paul will not be a burden

When he comes on his third visit, he's not going to change his practice of refusing support. It wants everything clear so there's no scope for misunderstandings like before (12:11ff).

b) Paul won't hesitate to use authority The OT law said that before any public discipline happened there needed to be three witnesses. Paul here taps into that idea. If this third one is bad as well, it will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. (12:19-13:4)

c) the church should examine themselves

[5-6] Nice little twist here. Paul wants the church to think about whether they are genuine Christians. If they are, that will actually have the effect of proving the authenticity of his apostleship. After all, it was he who first shared the gospel with them. So if they have genuine

faith, then his gospel, his ministry must also be genuine (12:5ff). However, Paul is not about justifying himself. He only ever wants to safeguard the faith of the church. He wants them to press on and be the best disciples of Christ they can be (12:9-10).

3.0 PAUL, PERFECTION AND US

Paul is laying the ground rules for another visit. And the ground rules are: he'll still refuse payment, he will discipline if he has to, and they ought to examine themselves and realise that they are Christians, and therefore he is an apostle. But all the time Paul is primarily concerned that the Corinthians reach maturity. Verse 11 pretty well summarises exactly what it is that Paul wants for the Corinthians. He wants them to be perfect in Christ. That's because Paul understands how important Jesus is. It's a good word for us.

Nothing in this life is more important than helping each other stay close to Christ. Paul was prepared to serve, and if needed, he was prepared to say the hard things. Let's love one another enough to do that too as we aim for perfection.