

2 Corinthians 12

What limits you from serving the Lord more effectively? Is there something you personally lack, some physical limitation, some personal inability that holds you back from more effective service?

What about the response of other people? Does their response – or lack of response – discourage you, causing you to be less dedicated to them? Does your commitment to others depend upon their response to you?

Paul dealt with both of these issues and was able to stay committed. He had something he described as a “thorn in the flesh”, some serious physical limitation, but was able to keep right on serving. In Corinth he also dealt with a church that didn’t appreciate all he had done for them. In some cases they questioned his authority, despite the fact that they first heard the gospel from Paul.

Why would Paul put up with that? How could he keep going when he wasn’t even physically well and this church didn’t even respond properly? It all had to do with the depth of his relationship with the Lord. He talks about that here in 2 Corinthians 12.

The better we understand Jesus, the better we are able to serve others in His name.

- I. Understanding Jesus allows us to serve God despite our limitations. 12:1-10
- II. Understanding Jesus allows us to serve people regardless of their response. 12:11-21

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- I. Understanding Jesus allows us to serve God despite our limitations. 12:1-10

- A. Paul’s visions:

- 1. Why the third person, “a man in Christ”? Probably to draw attention away from himself, as if he somehow earned the vision. He doesn’t want it to sound as if he is taking personal credit for the visions he received. He was a spectator more than a participant. Christ is the main focus. He also was experiencing what all of us one day will experience, being caught up and finding ourselves in the very presence of the Lord.

- 2. Caught up? *harpazō*
 - 1) to seize, carry off by force
 - 2) to seize on, claim for one’s self eagerly
 - 3) to snatch out or away (*Thayer*)

The same word is used to describe the rapture in 1 Thess. 4:16-17:

1 Thess. 4:16-17 NKJV ¹⁶For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive and remain shall be **caught up** together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

There is a lot that can be said about the Rapture, but we have a study coming up on that on Wednesday evening, so it's probably best to leave what there is to say until then.

3. Third heaven? Apparently the same as Paradise. Paradise is where Jesus said the thief on the cross would join Him the day they both died (Luke 23:43). Paradise is where the tree of life is (Rev. 2:7).

4. In the body or out? Paul didn't know. We may sometimes wonder what it is physically like for people between death and the resurrection. What's it like to be in heaven if our old body is still here on earth, decaying and we don't yet have a new one? The best answer I can give is "I don't know, but I'm sure it'll be great even if I don't understand it." Paul was actually taken up into heaven and didn't know if he was in his body or not.

B. The thorn in the flesh. Paul evidently had some kind of physical malady. There are many ideas as to what this was, but Paul never actually says.

1. *Skolops* Something pointed, sharp, as a stake, the point of a hook, a thorn, prickle ... something which causes severe pain or constant irritation ... equal to *astheneia* sickness, weakness. (See v.9) (*Complete Word Study Dictionary*)

2. We know God used it to keep him humble. (v.7)

3. We know he had it, we know he prayed about it repeatedly (v.8)

4. We know God didn't heal Paul from it, teaching him a most remarkable lesson through it. **Read vv.9-10 again.**

Application: Normally get depressed or dragged down when we think about our weaknesses, our inabilities or inadequacies. Paul provides a wonderful example. He prayed for relief, but the Lord wanted to give him something better: a reason to take his mind off of his own weakness and trust in the power of Christ.

This is probably not our natural way of thinking, but the Lord may have an easier time using our weaknesses than our strengths. This happens when we allow our inability to lead us to His ability.

A simple example: We just got back from a trip to Washington D.C. with a group of kids in our home school co-op. During the trip there were several times when it helped to ask directions to something rather than try to find it ourselves. That involves trusting that person's knowledge, but it usually paid off. In some cases, as we were walking around the city, the place we wanted to go was simply too far away. Taking the metro was quicker, but in that case you have to trust the person driving the train, who you never even get to see. But how much better than walking!

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II. Understanding Jesus allows us to serve people regardless of their response. 12:11-21

A. Not all of the members of the church in Corinth appreciated Paul as they should have. This was sad because the Lord truly used Paul to get this church started in the first place. The right response on the part of the Corinthians would have been to simply respect Paul for who he was and what the Lord had done through him.

B. 12:12 Paul speaks of the “signs of an apostle” and “signs and wonders and mighty deeds”. In the book of Acts, others besides the apostles were able to do miracles. Stephen and Philip, who were among the seven original deacons both come to mind. But it seems from this statement by Paul that all the apostles did miracles at one time or another.

Some people get uncomfortable with the miraculous. They have an upfront bias against anything supernatural. Therefore, they would conclude that neither Paul nor Jesus never really performed any miracles. Why? Because, in their view, miracles don’t happen.

Yet here Paul refers to his miracles as if the whole Corinthian church was well aware of what God did through Paul when he was in Corinth. If they never happened, Paul would be totally discrediting his ministry right here by claiming something happened that never did. By definition miracles are unusual, but they are not impossible. Once you have allowed for a supernatural God who made the universe, miracles are a minor addition. As C.S. Lewis put it:

“If we admit God, must we admit miracle? Indeed, indeed, you have no security against it. That is the bargain.” — Miracles, 1974, p.169

C. 12:14-18 **third time** (v.14) We aren’t really sure how many times Paul visited Corinth altogether. This third visit may have been his last. Luke only records 2 visits in the book of Acts.

D. This passage gives us a lot of insight as to how Paul viewed this church. This isn’t dry theology. This is the heart of the pastor toward the flock. He doesn’t want to take advantage of them. In fact, he’s completely willing to sacrifice himself for their sakes. Paul has even trained Titus to behave in the same way toward God’s people.

E. 12:15 **the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.** It is kind of sad to read this and to realize that this was the response of many in the church in Corinth. They rejected Paul, the one who served them with the greatest sacrifice. The one who loved them the most.

F. 12:19-21 The word “excuse” in v. 19 is better translated “defend”. Many Bible do translate it that way. Paul wants to make it clear that he is not simply defending himself to the Corinthians.

1. It’s not so much that he wants them to think well of him, but that he wants them to think properly. Paul wants them to have a right understanding of Jesus, a right understanding of himself and a right understanding of what authentic Christianity and Christian ministry looks like.

2. He's also more than a little bit afraid that their behavior will not be what it should be.

3. How was Paul able to put up with a church like this one in Corinth? Paul understood Jesus and that helped him to serve these people regardless of their response.

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Conclusions:

- Understanding Jesus allows us to serve God despite our limitations.
 - What natural limitations do you have that you think have kept you from serving the Lord or really being used by him?
 - Now the big question: Have you made that an excuse for sitting there and not doing anything? Are you willing to allow God to use you anyway, despite whatever limitations, weaknesses or unhelpful tendencies you may have? The question is not whether or not we have this or that ability. The question is whether we are giving Jesus 100% regardless of whoever we really are.
- Understanding Jesus allows us to serve people regardless of their response.
 - What if you pour everything you have into others and they end up not caring or not responding as you wish? What if you keep giving and they keep taking and in the end they never quite get it? They never grow. They never seem to benefit from what you do.
 - Paul dealt with that very thing in Corinth. He kept praying for them, kept writing to them and kept visiting them. In short, he never gave up, because his service to the church in Corinth was only part of his service to Jesus.

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