EXAMINE YOURSELF WHETHER IN THE FAITH

2 Corinthians 12:19-13:14

Key Verse: 13:5

In the last lesson Paul went on boasting, particularly about visions and revelations, being caught up to the third heaven, paradise and hearing inexpressible things. He said just that and not more, for man is not permitted to tell about such things. Then he said, “To keep me from becoming conceited, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to tormented me.” Three times he had pleaded with the Lord to take it away. But the Lord’s answer is this: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” And Paul said, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” May these words be with us and may we really learn to rely on the Lord so that Christ’s power may rest on us. In 12:19, Paul made it clear that the purpose of all his defence was for their strengthening and being built up. And starting from 12:19, running all the way to 13:10, this whole section is a summation of what concerns Paul. He concerns about the spiritual well-being of his flock and the church. It gives us such practical insight into the issues about the church must be concerned in order to be built up into wholesome church. In the final chapter, chapter 13, we see the words, “warning”, “examine”, and “test” written 4 times. It indicates that examining ourselves whether in the faith, or self faith-testing, is critical in building up our personal Christian life and the church.

**First, repentance, discipline, authority (12:20-13:4).** After defending his apostleship with its clear purpose of strengthening them, Paul says in verses 20 and 21, “For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.” What is Paul’s fear? It is that sin would remain in them, particularly the sin against the unity and purity of the church. Residual sin would eventually erode and destroy the church. Unresolved sin problems must be resolved individually or church-wide before God. In Revelation, we see how the risen Christ dealt with sin in the churches. The church in Thyatira seemed to be good with the commendation of Jesus, “I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first” (2:19). But Jesus clearly reprimanded, “Nevertheless, I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.” (2:20). They seemed to compromise their holy life in Christ with the culture of sexual immorality and idol-worship. Jesus knew the seriousness of their problem and rebuked them, urging them to repentance. Jesus said to the church in Sardis, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!” (3:1-2). God wants each church to be alive in repentance. We remember the words of 1 John 1:7, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin” and in 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Nowadays the general tendency of the church is to embrace the culture and accept all kinds of people without any hint of penitence, just being comfortable without feelings of guilt whatsoever. Most churches seem be to be swept away by the cultural power of the moral or sexual revolution, becoming deadened in sin. In these dead churches there will be no salvation of souls. We can say that the church is the gathering of repentant sinners, while the world is the place of unrepentant sinners even with no sense of shame over sin, even further with no awareness of sin. Even if we do not commit the sin of immorality as the people of the world do, our stance must be clear. Fundamentally sin is violating or disobeying God’s command. When our sin of disobedience is obvious, we should repent, which is the process of our sanctification growing in the holiness of God. May this church remain a repentant church, helping God’s flock of sheep to repent based on the truth of God.

Now let’s look at 13:1-2, “This will be my third visit to you. ‘Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: on my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others.” This is related to church discipline. Jesus said in Matthew 18:15-17, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won the brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and it he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” These words are the words of Jesus. Church is not the community of people for their well-being in this world. It is first and foremost the place of souls’ salvation like Noah’s ark of salvation. That’s why she could be clear about sin. Sin grows and spreads like pandemic, bringing each soul into eternal destruction. One said, “A church without church discipline is a church without Christ.”

In verses 2b and 3 Paul said, “On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier of any of others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me.” Paul had said in 1:23, “I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.” Paul had given them time to repent. Unless they repented, he had to act against unrepentant sinners on his return, as an apostle of Christ. Paul said in 13:10, “This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.” Here we see that Paul was like a father to them. We remember what Paul said in 12:14-15, “…what I want is not your possession but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.” Paul, on his return, did not want to be harsh in the use of the authority the Lord had gaven him, tearing them down, but he wanted to see that everything go well with them through their repentance, building them up.

It leads us to think of the authority the Lord Jesus gave Paul, which is totally different from any human authority. He says in verse 3, “since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.” First of all Christ is among his people. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” In Revelation, we see that the risen Jesus walks among the golden lampstands, which are churches (1:20; 2:1). He commends and rebukes vigilantly watching over them. He protects and fight against them when they go wrong. He is not indifferent at all. He is watchful and powerful among them. His presence is invisible but evident. He can build up the church, showing his transforming power or remove the church.

And Paul continues in verse 4, “For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power…” Surely Jesus was crucified helplessly at the hands of Romans manipulated by the Jews. His death on the cross was pitiful and tragic to the eyes of the people of the world. Yet, in fact his crucifixion shows both his helplessness/weakness and his power/might. For the crucifixion of Jesus has saving power. It is as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” and in 1:23-24, “We preach Christ crucified…the power of God and the wisdom of God.” The power of Christ’s crucifixion was vindicated by the power of God who raised him from the dead. It is as Paul said in Ephesians 1:19-20, “…That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead…” Now Christ lives by God’s power. He always lives (Hebrews 7:25).

And then Paul says, “Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you.” He had said in 10:1, “By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you…” By the meekness and gentleness of Christ he served them. He will also serve them by God’s power. His power and authority came from God’s power when he lived with Christ, delivering God’s message, the words of God to them. How powerful and authoritative God’s words are! His words are to be revealed as they are when they are believed and proclaimed. Jesus said in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” and he also said in John 12:47-48, “As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them…that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day.” The authorities of the Scriptures must stand in the church and the words of God must be the standard in the church however the world changes. The very authority that we ever have, the authority that we can ever exercise in the church, is biblical authority.

How authoritative the words of the Bible are! It clearly teaches that whoever believes will be saved and whoever does not believe will be condemned, there is heaven and there is hell, and the New Jerusalem and the lake of fire. It says, “Repent or Perish.” Last week I met a U of T student, who is from India. He said that his religion is Hinduism. I asked him about his belief and his being, he said that through the chemical process of two energies’ combining he was born and he would disappear through the dissolution of the two energies. When I asked, “Then, what is the meaning of your life?” he paused for a while. I told him about God’s creation, and Christ’s death and resurrection and his coming again. We talked more than 30 minutes. At the end he was very thankful for all the conversation and showed his interest in the words of the Bible. I pray that I may preach the gospel at least to one person each week. We believe and speak the words of the Bible. The biblical authority is greater than the government authority and any authority of the world.

**Second, examine yourselves (13:5-14).** Paul says in verse 5, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves…” In our society, there are various kinds of examinations.” As for students, there are midterms and final exams. There are physical examinations. It is to protect the physical body from certain diseases. Paul said, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.” Paul talks about the examination of the faith. People seem to have various kinds of faith, saying, “You have your faith and I have my faith.” Even demons have faith (James 1:19) believing that there is one God. But here it is the faith, which is objective. In Ephesians, Paul says of one Lord and one faith (4:5). Jude verse 3 says, “…I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” It is the faith all the saints had, the common faith, as is written in Titus 1:4, “To Titus, my true son in our common faith.” And Paul clearly wrote in Titus 1:1 and 2, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God’s elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness—a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time.” And we remember John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” It is crystal clear that the faith Paul talks about is the faith in Jesus Christ, which saves sinners, the saving faith. Acts 4:12 says, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Romans 3:22-23 say, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Only through faith in Jesus Christ sinners are justified and so saved. How precious faith in Jesus Christ is!

Paul said in Ephesians 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that that no one can boast.” This faith is not from men, nor from the wealth of the world, the success of the world or any power of the world, but from God as the gift of God. How precious God’s gift of faith, freely given by his grace, is! Though it is the free gift of God, we are to keep this faith at any circumstances. The early Christians denied Caesar worship not to deny their faith in Christ Jesus, and there were those who were gloriously martyred to keep their faith in the One who died for them and rose again from the dead. Apostle Paul did so many great things in his life. However, at the end of his life, his confession was this: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). In our country, to keep this faith in Christ Jesus is not easy. Although there seems to be no direct threats, there are indirect threats, which are increasingly growing. This is a trend of the world. Jesus said, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Mt 24:13; Mk 13:13; Lk 21:19).

For this, Paul said, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.” There is a saying, “Prevention is better than cure.” In fact, keeping the faith is prevention from spiritual diseases and furthermore from eternal destruction. So, Paul tells the Corinthian believers to have self-examination or self-test, self-checkup so that they may be in a spiritually safe zone or sound in faith. How painful it would be to see those who abandon their faith. Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:18-20, “…you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander…” He specifically mentioned the names.

And Paul said to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Watch your life and doctrine closely.” As for us we should examine ourselves whether we truly recognize Jesus as our Lord when we make an important decision in our lives, and check our attitude toward materials, for Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:21). Each of us should be clear about whether I worship God with his people absolutely, joyfully and thankfully. Also, in starting each day God wants us to have daily devotion to him, keeping our fellowship with him alive through his word and prayer each day. We remember that God tested Abraham to see whether he loved his son Isaac more than God, so that Abraham might truly love God more than anything else and be free in God. What we love more than God becomes an idol that ensnares our soul. Interestingly, 1 John, which excellently describes God’s love, ends with these words, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). And Paul says in Galatians 5:6, “…The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” This week a thought came into my mind; why does God put some people in my life? We do not meet many people in the path of our lives, but limited people. It is said that meeting is a blessing. There are the meetings between a husband and a wife, between parents and children, between friends, and between Bible students and Bible teachers, etc. Why are there such meetings in our lives? To ruin their lives or to truly build them up? As I questioned this, some people passed in my mind. I had to repent of my sin of lacking God’s love toward the people whom I encountered in this precious life path and asked for God’s mercy. Truly the faith in Christ Jesus is to be expressed in love. Also, in the faith we are to live by the Spirit.

After saying, “Examine yourselves…; test yourselves”, Paul questions, “Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” This question seems to be obvious and also sarcastic, yet what a poignant question! Paul said in Romans 8:9-10, “…If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.” Christians are those in whom Christ is. As we studied in chapter 11, Paul had a serious question about the Corinthian believers, for they so easily put up with a different Jesus, a different spirit, or a different gospel. Paul wanted to make sure that Christ is in them. Then they would not stand with the false apostles masquerading themselves as apostles of Christ. John said in 1 John 4:1, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are form God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” And then he said in 4:4, “you, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.” We are to recognize the Spirit of the truth and the spirit of falsehood based on the words of God so as to keep our faith pure and genuine.

Paul continues in verses 6 and 7, “And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.” Paul prayed that they might do what is right, even if he would not be approved by people. He had genuine concern for them to do what is right by having Christ in them.

And then Paul says in verse 8, “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” Paul was an apostle of Christ and an apostle of the truth, quite different from the false apostles. He said in 2 Corinthians 4:2, “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” In 6:7, he commended himself in purity, and the word of truth. He also said in 11:10, “As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine” and in 12:6, “Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth.” Faith and the truth are to go together. According to Jesus’ own words, he is the truth and he came into this world to testify to the truth, and everyone on the side of truth listens to him (Jn 14:6; 18:37). Believers in Christ are to engage in the battle for the truth.

In verse 9 he says, “We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.” Here “perfection” is translated to “fully restored” “be made complete” or “become mature.” Paul was like parents who want their children to grow strong and mature.

And in verse 10, “This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not fear tearing you down.” Paul’s ending seems to be tough, surely out of deep affection for them.

And here are final greetings: “Finally, brothers, good-by/rejoice. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” It is really striking that Paul’s heart was full of blessing for the Corinthian church, that gave much pain to him, the grace of Jesus and the love of God and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the comprehensive benediction, the trinitarian benediction, which we can find here only in the Bible.

Let’s remember the key verse, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test ourselves.” Our faith is faith in Jesus Christ and in the biblical authority. May our faith be true and genuine, reflected in our lives and in the body of Christ that stands against the cultural trend of our society in this world.