

# Course Study Guide

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NT224

*1 & 2 Corinthians:  
Two Letters to a  
Tough Church*

By Dr. Craig Blomberg

Updated 2014

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Our Daily Bread  
Christian University

# Lesson 1 Study Guide

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NT224

## *1 & 2 Corinthians: Two Letters to a Tough Church*

1 Corinthians:  
How the Body of Christ Must Function

Updated 2014

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# Objectives

As Paul addressed some thorny questions that divided the Corinthian church, he presented theological foundations for any church to build on. This lesson brings spiritual counsel to life's basic issues.

When you complete this lesson, "1 Corinthians: How the Body of Christ Must Function," you should be able to:

- Apply the book's structure, forms, and theology to gain a clearer understanding of its message.
- Name the major emphases of the book and explain how its content is organized around them.
- Develop an enduring commitment to aggressive pursuit of spiritual maturity.

# Scripture Reading

Read 1 Corinthians 1-16.

# Transcript

## Course Title: 1 & 2 Corinthians: Two Letters to a Tough Church

### Lesson One: 1 Corinthians: How the Body of Christ Must Function

#### I. Introduction

In our last lesson we had just begun to introduce Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, and we noted that the problem of factions, or divisions in the church was not only the first item that Paul had to address, but was one of the unifying features that accounted for this potpourri of problems that pervades the entire letter. As part of Paul's antidote to factionalism in chapters 1-4, we left off commenting that he focuses people's attention on the cross, the ultimate leveler against those who would put themselves forward by their own human credentials, seeking power or aggrandizement.

#### II. Division and Discipline (1:1-6:8)

He does, nevertheless, within these opening chapters, speak of a kind of wisdom, a maturity that he believes Christians should strive for—not the wisdom based on human philosophy and squabbings that the Corinthians were practicing, but a wisdom that comes from God that is, again, centered on the cross despite its foolishness by worldly standards.

##### A. Three Kinds of People

In the end of chapter 2 and on into chapter 3, in this context Paul introduces three kinds of individuals. He speaks of the natural person or the person without the Spirit; that is, the complete non-Christian. He speaks as well of the carnal Christian, and of the more spiritual Christian. One well-known international ministry has helpfully explained the difference among these three groups of people by imagining circles that stand for individual lives with a throne inside of that circle representing what takes place in the individual's life. In their diagrams, the ego, or self, is on the throne of the natural person or the non-Christian, and the cross is entirely outside of the circle. For the carnal Christian, the ego is still on the throne—even though the cross is inside of the circle; the person has made a profession of faith. But for the spiritual person it is the cross that is on the throne, with ego dethroned.

While these are helpful diagrams, I think to be fair to Paul we must say something more as well. There are non-Christians who are very altruistic and who have many things besides themselves in first place in their lives, but the point remains that it is not Christ and His cross. As for the carnal Christian, the danger we must be careful of not falling into is to assume that Paul in 1 Corinthians 3 refers to some kind of nominal Christianity whereby a person has made a profession of faith, however superficial, but for a long period of time, perhaps years on end, has shown no interest in spiritual things or any spiritual fruit. This is not the picture that is discussed in Corinth; rather these Christians are all very active. Part of their problem is that they are fighting themselves and climbing all over each other in order to exercise their spiritual

gifts. No, the carnal Christian is one who does not have the cross consistently on the throne of their lives, not because of lack of interest, but because of their interest in trying to put themselves forward even in the context of Christian ministry.

## B. Immorality Rebuked

As Paul proceeds in chapters 5 and 6 to the remaining issues addressed to him from the party of traveling people from Chloe's household, he has to address in turn a man who is living in incest with a woman who is simply described as "his father's wife." The unusual phraseology has suggested to most commentators that we are speaking here of a stepmother, a second wife of the father and perhaps one considerably younger than the father. Even Greco-Roman moral standards recognized that this was a flagrant sin, a flagrant breach of divine ethics, and so Paul is outraged that the Corinthian church is tolerating such a relationship.

One explanation for why they were permitting it is that the offending man may well have been one of the minority of well-to-do power brokers in the Corinthian church. We mentioned as we introduced the epistle in the last lesson that the minority of wealthy in the Corinthian church, those who were used to wielding power in secular ways or in pagan religions prior to their conversion to Christ, may have continued to afflict the Corinthian church with some of those same forms of behavior and account for a large number of the otherwise diverse problems that Paul has to address in this letter.

Paul commands that this man be handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Corinthians 5:5). It is not clear whether that means a literal death of some sort—somehow he believes that this man will be judged and die physically—or perhaps slightly more likely, if "flesh" is being used here, as Paul frequently does, to refer to the sinful nature. In this reading, he would be excommunicated, but on the hopes that such drastic action would cause the man to repent of his sin; thus the flesh would be put to death in this case. In 2 Corinthians, Paul will refer back to a man who has been punished by the Corinthian church who has repented and who now should be forgiven. We cannot be sure that this is the same individual, but of course if it is then this second interpretation is to be preferred because the man could not have physically died.

## C. Lawsuits

The next issue that Paul proceeds to involves lawsuits. In the ancient world, this was almost entirely something that rich people did to other rich people, and not so much to get richer as to gain greater honor or to shame their opponents in a culture of honor and shame. Again, Paul will have no tolerance for Christians suing other Christians. It would be good in our modern litigious societies if more Christians read and obeyed this chapter out of Paul's teaching as well.

## III. Sanctity of the Body (6:9-7:40)

The final issue in the first part of 1 Corinthians that is addressed comes at the end of chapter 6, and that is a warning against sexual immorality more generally, and against prostitution in particular. We recall from the previous lesson how rampant prostitution was at the seafaring

town of Corinth. Here Paul says that sexual immorality is a unique sin against one's own body, and he might have added against the body of the individual with which the person is sinning. The intimacy that sexual relationships communicate is to be reserved only for those with whom one is prepared to spend a lifetime in monogamous, heterosexual marriage. And Paul refers back, as Jesus had earlier, to God's original intention for marriage in Genesis 2—the one-flesh, unique intimacy of a man and a woman.

### A. Sexual Immorality

Paul also begins a rhetorical strategy towards the end of chapter 6 in dealing with the problem of sexual immorality that he will repeat several times in the coming chapters. It is what some commentators have called his “yes, but” logic. When there is a problem, when there is an opposing philosophy that Paul has to combat, he tries to find, if possible, ways to affirm at least part of what the erring Christians are doing or proposing. But, he then goes on to qualify it in a way that is consistent with Christian ethics. “Everything is permissible to me,” he acknowledges; and some modern translations actually put that statement of 1 Corinthians 6 into quotations, suggesting that it was a Corinthian slogan. Given Paul's expression of a law-free Gospel, there is a sense in which everything is permissible, but everything is not beneficial. The Christian life is not without its ethical or moral standards even if it does not follow the letter of the 613 Old Testament laws. This “yes, but” logic or strategy becomes all the more crucial to observe when we turn to the second half of Paul's letter, as he responds to questions that have been put to him in writing from a letter from the Corinthian church.

### B. Marriage Issues

The first of these issues, discussed in some length, occupies the entirety of 1 Corinthians 7, and it has to deal with issues of marriage, or of not getting married, or of divorce and remarriage, and the like. A correct interpretation of this chapter depends on recognizing 7:1 as just such a Corinthian slogan: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” “Touch” is being used here, as often was in the Greek language, as a euphemism for sexual intercourse: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” This is not Paul speaking, as Origen, the oldest known commentator on the Corinthian epistles recognized already around the year 200, but a slogan that reflects that more ascetic party, growing out of the dualism, the world-or material-denying nature of the Corinthian philosophy. People at Corinth, as we know have been described from various second-century writings, were going around promoting celibacy, the complete abstention from sexual relations throughout one's entire life, as the Christian ideal.

Once we understand that this is the way the chapter starts, then all of Paul's comments make good sense and fall into place. He discusses, in turn, a variety of categories of individuals and their marital status, and in each case tries to find a way to affirm, in part, what the pro-celibacy faction in Corinth is stating. There are circumstances in which it is very appropriate to refrain from sexual relations. But Paul refuses to make this an absolute, and so there is always a “yes, but”—there is always a qualifying logic. For those already married, where the chapter begins, clearly abstinence is the exception rather than the rule. For those who are unmarried or widowed, a life of celibacy—a life of choosing to be single or remain single—is much more viable, in as much as Paul himself notes that at this point in time he, too, is single. Those,

however, who are married who might be contemplating divorce must not do so, except for the one situation that we mentioned already in the context of Jesus' discussion of this topic in the Sermon on the Mount, when an unbelieving partner wishes to leave.

Those who are contemplating marriage, or perhaps engaged but not yet married, have the freedom to remain single, but Paul stresses against the pro-celibacy faction that it is no sin if they marry. The key in guiding decisions in a number of these contexts comes in 7:32-35: What will enable Christian men and women to have the greatest wholehearted service for their Lord? Some Christians can say with complete honesty and integrity that marriage and having a family makes them better suited for Christian ministry in tandem, or team fashion. Others, perhaps, are unduly distracted by competing allegiances. Interestingly, this criterion for whether someone should get married or not is not one often discussed in Christian circles, but it does seem to be the key to Paul's discussion in this chapter.

#### IV. Limitations of Christian Liberty (8:1-11:1)

In chapters 8-10 of 1 Corinthians, Paul moves to yet another topic, which at first glance seems very remote from many modern, at least Western, contexts, though in other parts of the world it is still quite an acute concern. That is the issue of eating food, meat in particular, that has been sacrificed to idols. In the Corinthian marketplace, or agora, it was very common for meat to have some kind of label acknowledging the fact that a prayer had been said over this piece of food dedicated to one of the Greek gods or goddesses, often in a ceremony that took place in the temple precincts in the hill overlooking Corinth.

##### A. No Sin at All

Is eating such food in some fashion compromising Christian values? Paul makes three points throughout his teaching on this theme in chapters 8-10. The first is that it is in fact, no sin at all. There is nothing inherently unspiritual or sinful, or any way in which food is actually changed just because someone has prayed a prayer to some foreign deity over it. On the other hand, Paul balances this comment out by noticing that many in Corinth are what he calls weaker brothers, those whose conscience is offended and worse still, who may be forced to or led to commit something that is, in fact, actually sinful if they indulge in this practice that otherwise appears to be morally neutral. Paul says, therefore, for the sake of these weaker brothers (and sisters, we should add today), that when such a person is present and might have their conscience defiled or be led into sin, then the more mature or stronger Christian brother or sister should refrain. Interestingly, however, when the chapter closes with Paul's summary statements in 10:23-11:1, he makes a third point that in essence tips the scales in favor of the first point over the second, all other things being equal: Unless there is specific reason to believe that such a person is present who would be harmed by the questionable behavior, the Christian is free to eat. Paul is very concerned, as we have seen him elsewhere, that nothing turn the Christian relationship of freedom in Christ into one of legalism.

##### B. Voluntary Refrain

In between his explicit discussion of the issue of food sacrificed to idols in these three chapters,

Paul discusses analogous questions where the same kind of principles of Christian liberty and voluntary refrain come into play. The issue of whether or not one should accept money for ministry occupies a good part of chapter 9. And in 9:19-23 Paul enunciates the principles that motivate his logic throughout this discussion. It is that famous paragraph in which he explains how he tries to be all things to all people, in the hopes that he might save some. Of course, Paul is not saying that he would contravene specific moral absolutes or scriptural prohibitions just for the sake of winning people to Christ. But on any potentially morally neutral matter, where Scripture is not explicit and it is not clear that something is inherently good or evil in and of itself, Paul will bend over backwards to accommodate culture and practices and customs of non-Christian people so as not to put any unnecessary obstacles in front of their becoming believers. He has already stressed how much an obstacle the cross itself is, and the whole message of accepting its foolishness—someone else dying for the sins and for the penalty that we deserve to pay for those sins. No need to put additional obstacles in front of this. It would be good if Christians throughout the world today took this principle more into mind.

It is important to note also the type of person that is not considered a weaker brother in these three chapters. It is the person that one writer has somewhat amusingly dubbed the professional weaker brother. This is the person who constantly objects to everything new or unusual in Christian circles—not because they would be tempted to follow the practice, by any stretch of the imagination—just because they are inherently conservative and legalistic and don't like anything that challenges tradition. This is not the weaker brother who is tempted to be led into sin, and interestingly it is much more like the legalists that throughout Paul's ministry he consistently forthrightly condemns. Ironically, we often bend over backwards to kowtow to such people in our circles, while not reaching out in creative ways to non-Christians, seeing how many ways we can relate to them without actually sinning. Paul, significantly, calls us to reverse that procedure.

## V. Conduct in Worship (11:2-14:40)

In chapters 11-14, Paul then proceeds to discuss a series of topics that deal with conduct in Christian worship.

### A. Head Covering

The first of these has to do with head coverings on men and women in the city of Corinth, in the church there, 11:2-16. All of the historical background of this practice is not entirely clear. For one thing, we are not even sure what it is that Paul is referring to when he talks about men praying with their heads uncovered and women praying (and in each case also prophesying) with their heads covered. It may be a veil, or it may simply refer to a covering of long hair.

Hairstyles and head coverings sent a variety of religious and sexual signals in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world. There is one very important scriptural precedent which makes it very unlikely that Paul believed he was giving here timeless, absolute teaching for all people in all places. As a Jew steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, he would have known about the prohibition against the Nazirite in Old Testament times ever cutting his hair—Samson being the most famous, though somewhat wayward, example of this Nazirite. Therefore, to say that it

is always disgraceful for a man to have long hair would contradict explicit scriptural teaching. When Paul, in verse 14, therefore, appeals to “nature” for the practices he is commanding here, he is probably using nature in the established Greek sense of long and well-established custom of that particular day or culture.

Paul did not want hair or head coverings to send misleading signals concerning someone’s sexual or religious faithfulness. In cultures where head coverings do not send these signals, Christians should feel free not to follow the letter of Paul’s teaching, but perhaps to ask the question: Are there other ways in which, in their culture, they can demonstrate or can avoid sending the wrong signals concerning their sexual or religious fidelity?

## B. The Lord’s Supper

The latter half of chapter 11, beginning with verse 17, then proceeds to the topic of the Lord’s Supper. This is to be partaken of with concern for those in the congregation who are less well off. “Partaking unworthily” in verse 27 is defined by the verses that precede it—those who go ahead and eat and drink too much without concern for their fellow brother or sister in this early Christian love feast. Again, all kinds of applications of this passage have come up throughout Christian history that have lost sight of this original context. The only ones that Paul is asking to refrain from the Lord’s Supper in the initial context is those who are not concerned for the poor in their midst. That could revolutionize our application of who did or did not take the Lord’s Supper if we were to take that teaching seriously.

## C. Spiritual Gifts

Chapters 12-14 proceed to a unified discussion of spiritual gifts and the problems that were being caused in Corinth because of people’s insensitive use of those gifts. Of many teachings that are important in these chapters we may enumerate seven. In 12:7, Paul stresses that every Christian has at least one spiritual gift. The implication is we should seek to discover them and use them faithfully. In 12:11, he stresses that not all have the same gift—the Spirit decides who gets what. This should alert us to ever elevating any particular gift as something that all Christians should have as a mark of salvation or even Christian maturity. Third, in verses 12-26, with the famous metaphor of the body and the interdependence of its parts, Paul stresses how all gifts are important and all are necessary. None can be demeaned, even the less visible ones. Fourthly, the famous chapter on love, chapter 13, beautiful though it is in and of itself, is set in the context of Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts to make the point that all the gifts in the world, without love, without the selfless use of those gifts in service of others, is worthless.

Next, chapter 14 discusses the two particularly troubling gifts in the Corinthian context, and often still today, of prophecy and tongues. And the main point of this chapter is to prefer prophecy, the public proclamation of God’s Word, to tongues, because it alone is immediately intelligible without interpretation. Nevertheless, it is important here to note that Paul does not rule out speaking in tongues, even while he does give specific criteria for how they are to be exercised decently and in order. Those two principles together could go a long way to solving most controversies about tongues in the church today.

In this context, too, in verses 33-38 Paul gives the puzzling commands that women are to be silent and not to speak in the church. There have been a variety of interpretations of this verse, but the one that cannot be correct is that Paul is commanding them to absolute silence throughout the entire Christian assembly. After all, back in 11:5, he has already permitted them to pray and to prophesy (today we might say to preach, to proclaim God's Word in public). Probably there are specific circumstances relating to the disruption of uneducated or immature Christian women in the church at Corinth, or perhaps there are specific contexts, maybe related to the very spiritual gifts in question—speaking in tongues, or interpreting tongues, or something of that nature—that Paul has in mind.

## VI. Resurrection of the Dead and Conclusion (15:1-16:24)

The final major theological topic that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians occupies all of chapter 15—a very important teaching passage on the resurrection of Jesus.

### A. Resurrection of Christ

He makes, in essence, three points throughout this chapter: First of all, stressing the historicity or factuality of the Resurrection by itemizing all of the witnesses to whom Jesus appeared; second, stressing how essential it is to our hope of salvation, how the very foundation of Christian faith hangs on this doctrine. If Christ be not raised, we are of all people most to be pitied, Paul says, because it means we have no hope of life after death. The rest of the chapter, then, indicates not only that Jesus' death and resurrection is the firstfruits of our coming resurrection to life eternal in bodily form, perfected and glorified, but also the nature of that resurrection body—continuous with our old humanity, but also perfected, and therefore discontinuous.

### B. Collection for Needy

Chapter 16 introduces briefly an issue Paul will discuss in much greater length in 2 Corinthians, namely, a collection of money he is beginning to organize for needy Christians in Judea. And then the letter concludes with closing greetings.

## VII. Theology

If we summarize the theology of 1 Corinthians throughout this potpourri of problems, we come back again to the theme with which Paul began in chapter 2. The cross, the crucified Messiah, the one who should make us so humble because of what He did that we did not deserve, for our sake, is the center of Christian preaching and proclamation. The cross alone, of course, is meaningless without the Resurrection, and so it is interesting to see how Paul frames this epistle—the second chapter and the second to the last chapter dealing in detail with the Crucifixion and the Resurrection specifically. If Christians will focus on these two doctrines, then issues of Christian behavior will begin to fall into place. As they will consider what is best for others, they will follow that beautiful poem of love of chapter 13 and begin to put it into practice in numerous, concrete situations.

# Discussion Questions

Think of an area of conflict in your church or in the church at large today. Dr. Blomberg says that if we focus on the two doctrines of the crucifixion and the resurrection, the issues of Christian behavior will begin to fall into place. Explain how such a focus would affect a resolution of the area of conflict you have identified.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul explains how he tries to be all things to all people. Describe, in your own words, what you think Paul is saying in this passage. How can we apply his teaching in this passage to our Christian walk? What precautions should we take in applying this teaching?

Write a one-sentence summary of the teaching of 1 Corinthians. Then, explain how your sentence summarizes this epistle.

# Further Study

## **Suggested reading for this lesson:**

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 56: “The Epistle to the 21st Century” (1 Corinthians)

## **Philip Yancey Devotional**

### **Out of the Melting Pot - 1 Corinthians 12:12-13:13**

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. . . . You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Cor. 12:14, 27)

Paul first visited the Grecian city of Corinth during one of the most stressful times of his career. Lynch mobs had chased him out of Thessalonica and Berea. The next stop, Athens, brought on confrontation with intellectual scoffers, and by the time Paul arrived at Corinth, he was in a fragile emotional state.

Shortly, opposition sprang up in Corinth. Jewish leaders hauled Paul into court. But in the midst of this crisis, God visited Paul with a special message of comfort: “I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10).

Those last words must have startled Paul, for Corinth was known mainly for its lewdness and drunken brawling. The Corinthians worshipped Venus, the goddess of love, and a temple built in her honor employed more than a thousand prostitutes. Thus Corinth seemed the last place on earth to expect a church to take root. Yet that’s exactly what happened. A Jewish couple opened their home to Paul, and for the next eighteen months he stayed in Corinth to nurture an eager band of converts.

Corinth was filled with Orientals, Jews, Greeks, Egyptians, slaves, sailors, athletes, gamblers, and charioteers. And the Corinthian church reflected that same crazy-quilt pattern of diversity. When Paul wrote them this letter, he searched for a way to drive home the importance of Christian unity. He settled on a striking analogy from the human body. By comparing members of the church of Christ to individual parts of a human body, he could neatly illustrate how diverse members can work together in unity.

This analogy fit so well that it became Paul’s favorite way of portraying the church. (He would refer to “the body of Christ” more than thirty times in his various letters.) Having also raised the question of how diverse people can work together in a spiritual body, he answered that question with a lyrical description of love, the greatest of all spiritual gifts.

**Life Question:** First Corinthians 13 describes ideal love. Which of these characteristics do you need to work on?

# Glossary

**Origen** — Origen (c. 185-c. 254) was an Alexandrian biblical critic, exegete, theologian, and spiritual writer. The facts of his life are recorded by Eusebius. His chief work on biblical criticism is his famous *Hexapla*. The most important of Origen's theological works is the *De Principiis*, which covers a wide range of doctrinal topics in four books.

**Idolatry** — Worship or honor paid to any created object. The forms of idolatry are (1) Fetishism, or worship of trees, rivers, hills, stones, etc. (2) Nature worship, the worship of the sun, moon, and stars, as the supposed powers of nature. (3) Hero worship, the worship of deceased ancestors, or of heroes. Idolatry was essentially materialistic, based on the idea that humans would feed the "gods" in exchange for agricultural fertility.

# Quiz

1. According to the book of 1 Corinthians, what is the center of the Christian message?
  - A. The love and goodness of God
  - B. The Ten Commandments
  - C. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus
  - D. The heroes of the faith
  
2. If a man and woman who were considering marriage followed the principles found in 1 Corinthians 7, what question would they ask?
  - A. What is the counsel of those who have spiritual oversight in our lives?
  - B. Will this meet our needs for companionship and intimacy?
  - C. Are we compatible and right for each other?
  - D. Will this enable us to have the greatest wholehearted service for the Lord?
  
3. In regard to lawsuits, Paul:
  - A. Has great tolerance for Christians suing other Christians
  - B. Has no tolerance for Christians suing other Christians
  - C. Has a limited amount of tolerance for Christians suing other Christians
  - D. Understands they are sometimes the only way for Christians to resolve conflicts
  
4. What does Paul mean when he refers to a “weaker brother”?
  - A. One whose conscience is offended and may feel compelled to indulge in what they regard as sinful that otherwise appears to be morally neutral
  - B. One who is inherently conservative and legalistic
  - C. One who objects to everything new or unusual in Christian circles
  - D. One who does not like anything that challenges tradition
  
5. What does Paul **not** teach about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians?
  - A. Every Christian has at least one spiritual gift.
  - B. Although God values some gifts more than others, He desires all Christians to exhibit humility in using their gifts.
  - C. Any gift practiced without love is worthless.
  - D. The gift of prophecy is preferable to the gift of tongues.
  
6. What does Paul teach about sexual relations between believers?
  - A. It is appropriate in all circumstances.
  - B. Married people should always abstain.
  - C. It is never appropriate.
  - D. It is up to the individual whether to marry or not.

7. Which does Paul **not** teach about Christ's resurrection in 1 Corinthians?
  - A. It was first and foremost a spiritual event.
  - B. It is a fact, with many witnesses.
  - C. It is essential to our hope of salvation.
  - D. It depicts what our resurrection will be like.
  
8. Which of the following characterized Paul's attitude toward presenting rules as part of the Gospel?
  - A. That moral absolutes really don't matter
  - B. That he will ignore scriptural prohibitions for the sake of winning people to Christ
  - C. That he practiced empathy in his evangelism
  - D. That he will yield on any morally neutral matter for the sake of non-Christians
  
9. Which of the following was likely a slogan used by at least some of the Corinthians and quoted by Paul in this letter?
  - A. It is good for a man to touch a woman.
  - B. Eat, drink, and be merry.
  - C. Everything is permissible for me.
  - D. Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
  
10. Who is a "carnal" Christian, as presented by Paul in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians?
  - A. A nominal Christian
  - B. A Christian who has shown no fruit
  - C. A Christian who is active in the church, yet is practicing sexual immorality
  - D. A Christian who is active in the church, yet is setting his or her own course

Answers: 1. C 2. D 3. B 4. A 5. B 6. D 7. A 8. D 9. C 10. D

# Lesson 2 Study Guide

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NT224

## *1 & 2 Corinthians: Two Letters to a Tough Church*

2 Corinthians: How a Godly Person  
Deals With an Ungodly Church

Updated 2014

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Our Daily Bread  
Christian University

# Objectives

In 2 Corinthians, Paul deals with some extremely difficult issues, including attacks on his integrity and his reputation as a Christian minister. His careful dealing with these issues provides an excellent model for any person to follow. This lesson also presents a discussion of authorship and literary issues. It provides a model for how a student approaches critical issues while it teaches essential background information to help us be more accurate students of Scripture.

When you complete this lesson, “2 Corinthians: How a Godly Person Deals With an Ungodly Church,” you should be able to:

- Explain how to study critical questions in the biblical text and apply those explanations to your own study.
- Discuss the major issues presented in 2 Corinthians and explain how Paul dealt with them.
- Discover how a godly person defends against an unjust personal attack.

# Scripture Reading

Read 2 Corinthians 1-13.

# Transcript

## Course Title: 1 & 2 Corinthians: Two Letters to a Tough Church

### Lesson Two: 2 Corinthians: How a Godly Person Deals With an Ungodly Church

#### I. Introduction and Structure

In this lesson, we come to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. As with the Thessalonian congregation, we have the opportunity here to infer how a first-century Christian church reacted to an apostolic epistle.

##### A. First Nine Chapters

The first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians seem to be very positive, particularly in comparison with the perplexing set of problems that Paul had to address in his first epistle; and we may infer that the Corinthians reacted largely positively to Paul's various commands, and made substantial improvement in their walk with the Lord. Chapters 8 and 9, at first glance, seem unrelated to anything previous in the letter, but unpack the brief remarks that Paul made in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 about the collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem.

##### B. Chapters 10 through 13

Chapters 10-13 seem to have a quite different tone than any of the nine chapters that precede them, as Paul suddenly leaves his conciliatory tone and in no uncertain terms very sharply warns the Corinthians against accepting the advances of false teachers who have infiltrated their midst. These three quite different parts of 2 Corinthians have led scholars to propose a variety of hypotheses to explain their relationship. In more critical or skeptical scholarly circles, there have been various proposals of multiple letters collected together at some early point in Christian history and put on one scroll, which then has come to be known as 2 Corinthians.

There are even questions about the sequence of these various portions of 2 Corinthians if, in fact, the idea of partitioning into multiple letters be adopted as a possibility. Some, for example, would argue that chapters 10-13 form an intermediate letter that preceded the writing of 2 Corinthians, when they had not yet responded as positively to Paul's initial teaching of 1 Corinthians. Others keep chapters 10-13 where they are but imagine them following the sending of chapters 1-9, after Paul later learns that false teachers—Judaizers, of a kind similar to what we saw as we discussed Paul's letter to the Galatians—had come to town and were troubling the church afresh.

More conservatively, we may imagine chapters 10-13 simply being written after a pause in Paul's dictation of the letter. It was common in the ancient world for letters to be dictated orally to an amanuensis, or to a scribe, often over a several-day period of time, not unlike the

way some people even write letters today—even when they write by themselves but put it aside and then continue it a bit later.

It may well be that the Corinthian church had made great strides in improving in many areas, but that there was one area that prominently still figured in Paul's need to address what they were lacking—namely, issues of financial stewardship, thus accounting for the sequence of chapters 1-9; and that in between his dictation of these chapters and his completion of the letter, fresh news arrived to Paul suggesting that new trouble was afoot in Corinth.

### C. Chapter 2:14-7:4

There are still other problems that scholars have found in trying to analyze the somewhat disjointed structure of 2 Corinthians: 2:14-7:4 seems to be a major digression. Paul has been talking about his travels, the fact that he has now left Ephesus, he has made it to Macedonia, he will shortly be arriving in Corinth again—information incidentally which all helps us to date this epistle to approximately the year 56, just after Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus as part of his third missionary journey. But this discussion is suddenly interrupted in 2:14 only to be resumed in 7:5. One could take that entire middle section out and the text would flow smoothly as if nothing had ever intervened.

The same phenomenon attaches to the small unit, 6:14-7:1. If 2:14-7:4 has been called Paul's major digression, this latter passage is often called his minor digression, as he addresses the theme of not being unequally yoked with unbelievers. And yet, that short passage seems to have little to do with the surrounding context, could be removed, and 6:13 and 7:2 flow very naturally as though nothing had intervened.

Depending on one's understanding of how free early Christians felt to combine various letters together into one scroll, then, these disjointed seams of Paul's writing have led some to think of many different letters all collected together in a sort of anthology in 2 Corinthians. Other more conservative writers, however, have tried to find literary explanations by which the unity of 2 Corinthians can be preserved, particularly in light of the fact that there is no textual evidence from the ancient world that would suggest any of these pieces of 2 Corinthians ever circulated separately.

### D. Extended Communication

But before we are too critical of some of these other proposals, we do have to make mention of the fact that the evidence of 1 and 2 Corinthians together does clearly reveal that more communication was going on between Paul and Corinth than has been preserved in our canon—communication that was both oral and written. In fact, we may highlight at least five letters that went back and forth between Paul and the Corinthians, even if we are not prepared to speak of more than this.

First Corinthians 5:9 alludes to a previous correspondence of Paul to the Corinthian church. Here is a clear reference to a letter which obviously has been lost. Presumably it was not preserved because it was not as universally theologically significant as those that have been

preserved. First Corinthians 7:1, we have already alluded to, describes a previous letter from the Corinthians to Paul; and it, too, has not been preserved, although we can reconstruct the questions that it asks by means of the topics Paul addresses in the latter segment of 1 Corinthians. What we call 1 Corinthians, therefore, is at least Paul's second letter to them. And if the references in 2 Corinthians 2:4 and 7:8 back to a painful or severe or sorrowful letter are judged to be too harsh a description of 1 Corinthians, they may well point to yet another lost letter, a letter that was penned and received in between the writing and reception of what we call 1 and 2 Corinthians. That makes our 2 Corinthians the fifth item of correspondence and the fourth letter that Paul wrote to Corinth. If chapters 10-13 be separated off as a separate piece, or any of the other proposals that we have mentioned, then there may well be even more.

Nevertheless, for the Christian the authoritative form is the canonical form of the letter, and we must come to grips with the letter as a unity in the form we now find it.

## II. Outline

One very simple outline of all 13 chapters, a simple a-b-a structure, refers to chapters 1-7 as describing Paul's apostolic ministry, in what we might call tender tones. Chapters 8-9 then become the focal center of the letter, the one major remaining ethical issue that has to be addressed—namely, questions of financial stewardship, the offering for Jerusalem in this case. Chapters 10-13 can then be seen, perhaps even as deliberately planned, as balancing out the tender tones of chapters 1-7 by resuming a discussion of Paul's apostolic ministry, this time in comparison with the false teachers, in much tougher tones.

A more speculative and more detailed outline of the first seven chapters, a section that seems to have both a major and minor digression, may account for what seems to us somewhat disjointed by appealing to the well-known ancient device, a literary form of outlining material, both oral and written, known as a chiasm, or a chiasmus—namely, inverted parallelism. In its simplest form this is an a-b-b-a form, but it could and often was extended to a-b-c-b-a, a-b-c-d-c-b-a, and so forth. We will propose an outline, admittedly somewhat speculative, that perhaps accounts for the various literary seams in 2 Corinthians 1-7 in terms of precisely such an inverted parallelism.

## III. Explanation of Paul's Ministry (1:1-7:16)

### A. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-11)

Following his introduction to this letter that has been called a letter of apologetic self-commendation, following the introductory greetings, Paul launches into the conventional thanksgiving, verses 3-11. In this section Paul introduces an important motif that will recur throughout his letter: explanations from a Christian perspective of why believers must suffer. The reason for introducing this topic is because of the hardships Paul himself has experienced as an apostle, and because of the trouble the church of Corinth has had coming to grips with suffering in the context of Christian life or ministry.

Way back in 1 Corinthians 4:8 and following, Paul has had to compare using ironic, even

sarcastic or scathing, language—the suffering and persecution and shame and ignominious circumstances he has faced as an itinerant Christian apostle and leader, as over against the seeming life of ease and triumphalism of the would-be Corinthian leaders.

He unpacks this theme at a number of points, then, throughout 2 Corinthians, the first of which comes in this introductory thanksgiving. And he gives here one of several reasons that we will highlight as we proceed through the letter for why Christians suffer: in this case, because it enables us to give others who are suffering the kind of comfort that can come only from God in Christ, which we ourselves may receive on those occasions in which we suffer.

#### B. Confidence in Motives (1:12-22)

The body of the letter then begins with 1:12 as Paul describes his ministry with the Corinthians. Verses 12-22 include and enunciate Paul's confidence in his motives—that he was not vacillating despite changed travel plans, but rather trying to spare Corinthians more sorrow or grief that he would have had to inflict on them if they had not yet responded positively to his previous injunctions.

#### C. Paul's Sorrow (1:23-2:11)

Chapter 1:23-2:11 alludes specifically to Paul's sorrow over the offending party in Corinth who had to be punished. We commented in the last lesson that we can't prove that this is the same man as the incestuous offender of 1 Corinthians 5, but it is suggested by many commentators that it might well be. Here Paul seems to speak of someone who has personally offended him, which does not describe any of the details of 1 Corinthians 5; but if, in fact, Paul has made an intervening journey to Corinth in between the visits actually narrated in the book of Acts, which this section of 2 Corinthians seems to presuppose, it may well be that there was a personal confrontation between Paul and this offending individual during that otherwise unnarrated occasion.

Now, however, the man has responded properly and Paul encourages his rehabilitation, a reminder that disfellowshipping or excommunication, even in the most severe cases of Christian church discipline, is never purely punitive, but always done in the hopes that it will jar the person into their senses, lead to repentance, and lead to them being welcomed back into Christian fellowship.

#### D. Travel to Macedonia (2:12-13)

Chapter 2:12-13 then begins to enunciate Paul's travels to Macedonia. It is from these verses and those that are paired with them in chapter 7 that we learn that Paul is en route. He has already left Ephesus, he has made it as far as northern Greece, he has sent Titus ahead of him to check up on the circumstances in Corinth, is eagerly hoping that he will rendezvous soon with Titus and receive a good report. But at this point, in narrating his travels he has not yet received that report, and so he continues on hurriedly and expectantly.

## E. Christian and Non-Christian Living (2:14-4:6)

What seems at first glance to be a digression beginning in 2:14 can actually be explained as following naturally from the comment that Paul has just made. The fact that he is traveling, an itinerant minister waiting to meet up with Titus, reminds him of another kind of travel—the forced marches of prisoners of war being led in chains captive back to the city of the triumphant warring armies. He feels like just such a prisoner of war taken captive, at least by human standards, but recognizes also that this can be seen as a victory parade, paradoxically from a Christian perspective. What Paul then does in 2:14-4:6 is to itemize a series of contrasts between Christian and non-Christian living that proceed by means of a very Jewish rhetorical device, by what has been called a chain-link reasoning or catchwords.

This is not material that yields itself easily to Western linear outlines, but rather one key word, epitomizing the theme of a particular section of Paul's thinking and writing, then naturally triggers a related word which leads him through what today we might call almost a stream of consciousness writing to the next topic, and so on.

As Paul is traveling to Corinth, he is reminded of the fact that itinerant ministers in the ancient world often took with them letters of recommendation, especially as they were going to new communities. Others who knew them and could vouchsafe for their integrity, wrote letters that could then be passed on to people who did not yet know them. Paul makes the point that the Corinthians need no such letters of recommendation, for he was their founding apostle. He was the one who first established the church. But the catchword "letter," used first of all to refer to a scroll or document, then makes Paul think of the expression "the letter of the law," and he moves to contrasting those who are still following a very legalistic, scrupulous adherence to all of the fine points of Old Testament law with the freedom that Christ has brought with the Spirit.

The letter of the law contrasts with the age of the Spirit, which brings the law written on our hearts and internalized in a nonlegalistic fashion. This reference to the Spirit then leads him to a further discussion of the ministry of that Spirit, who brings contrasting degrees of glory as one compares the old covenant with the new covenant.

And as a particular poignant illustration of those contrasting degrees of glory, Paul next thinks of the veil that Moses put over his face as he came down from Mount Sinai so that the people would not be dazzled by the blinding glory. But, compared with the new covenant, Paul says that glory is very temporary and fading. Obviously, he is not thinking of some literal corresponding event in the new covenant age, but rather to the glory more metaphorically that the Christian dispensation reveals.

When people come to Christ, then, out of the law, it is as if a veil were removed from their face. This cluster of contrasts, while not as readily yielding to a linear outline, nevertheless makes good sense in ancient rhetorical approaches. But all of this talk about the affliction of Paul's ministry, about the hardships of Christian service, then lead him to balance off with a compensating treatment of the glory that is to come.

## F. Present Afflictions/Coming Glory (4:7-5:10)

Chapter 4:7-5:10 contrasts the present afflictions with the coming glory of the Christian life. Here, in turn, appear both one of the most poignant catalogs of how Christians may suffer, to the very point of almost seeming defeated, and yet God protects them from ever completely capitulating. Chapter 4:15 nicely summarizes, then, a second reason that Christians have to suffer—that the surpassing greatness of the power may be seen to be of God. Paul has already described our human bodies' circumstances as having the treasure of God in very frail earthly vessels. People do not look up and take notice if someone has all of the world's circumstances in their favor and are living happy, triumphant lives. But they do stand up and take notice if people somehow live victoriously despite circumstances that by the world's standards would suggest they had no reason for joy or happiness or victory.

Chapter 5 then proceeds to the theme of the coming glory, and is one of the important teaching passages in the New Testament on the coming resurrection of believers following judgment day, and particularly on what historically, for the most part, has been taken as a passage teaching the intermediate state—that is, believers, upon their deaths and prior to Christ's return and the resurrection of all believers to bodily existence, will, nevertheless, while absent from the body, 5:8, be at home with the Lord. There will be conscious existence, with Jesus, even in this preresurrection and therefore, apparently, disembodied state.

## G. Reconciliation (5:11-21)

Second Corinthians 5:11-21 forms the heart, or the center, of this unfolding chiasm, or inverted parallelism as Paul then comes to the core of Christian ministry. The theme that dominates these verses and characterizes them is the theme of reconciliation—first of all with God, and secondly with fellow humans. Reconciliation, like justification, which we discussed in the context of Galatians, is a well-known metaphor from Paul's world for the canceling of enmity between previous warring and hostile parties.

And in this context, too, we read in verses 18-21 a key statement on the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ that made this reconciliation possible. From this point on we may proceed more rapidly, because 2 Corinthians simply begins to repeat and rehearse, though with some important additional comments, the themes that have been mentioned thus far, the second half or backside, as it were, of this chiastic or inverted parallel structure.

## H. Backside of Chiasmus (6:1-7:16)

Chapter 6:1-10 contrasts present afflictions with present glory; Chapter 6:11-7:4, another series of contrasts between belief and unbelief, this time described in terms of Christ versus Belial, another name for Satan. Chapter 7:5-7 now resume a discussion of Paul's travels, the relief that he has in meeting up with Titus and receiving the good report, the Corinthians' appropriate godly sorrow that has driven the offending man to repentance (verses 8-13a), and Paul's newfound confidence in the Corinthians (verses 13b-16).

#### IV. Collection for the Saints (8:1-9:15)

As Paul then turns in chapters 8-9 to the one remaining important ethical issue, that of stewardship, the collection for Jerusalem—we may enunciate a number of important principles that apply to Christian giving in any time and place. Chapter 8:1-15 itemizes four of these. Christian giving must be sacrificial (verses 1-4). It must be surrendering of one's entire self to Christ and to whatever service is needed (verses 5-7).

It ought to be done with sincerity (verses 8-11), and proportionately (verses 12-15). Here the principle is enunciated of what some readers today have called the graduated tithe. Interestingly there is no New Testament passage clearly applicable to believers this side of Pentecost that commands Christians to give ten percent. For the very poor this may be an undue hardship on them, but for most middle class or well to do Christians, ten percent is probably far too little, given the acute human needs, spiritually and physically of our world today, including among more than 200 million impoverished Christian brothers and sisters. Rather, the principles of verses 12-15 would suggest that the more one makes, the higher percentage one should consider giving to the Lord's work.

Chapter 8:16-9:5 then stresses how Paul goes out of his way so that the integrity of this collection not be compromised in any way, another crucial theme in many modern contexts. And 9:6-15 closes his discussion by reminding the believers in Corinth of the rewards of Christian giving, not by any means limited to or even primarily involving material reward, but involving the spiritual reward of people giving praise to God, perhaps even in the evangelistic context. If Christians today were to be seen widely to be very scrupulous and generous and compassionate in the use of their funds, there is no doubt it would have a very significant evangelistic impact. Unfortunately, so many compromising models have actually been deleterious to the cause of Jesus Christ.

#### V. Vindication of Paul's Apostleship (10:1-13:14)

##### A. Paul against the False Apostles (10:1-11:33)

Finally, in chapters 10-13, Paul turns to these newly arrived false apostles and Judaizers in Corinth. Throughout these chapters he applies a well-known Greco-Roman rhetorical device of boasting, but turns it on its head: Whereas the false teachers were boasting in all of their Jewish credentials, in all of their spiritual accomplishments and maturity, Paul says he will boast in his weakness. Chapter 11:16-33 offers the most poignant catalog thus far of Paul's sufferings as a persecuted and itinerant apostle for Jesus Christ. This is what he will boast in, and this is the one area in which the false teachers cannot match him.

##### B. Thorn in Flesh (12:1-10)

Chapter 12:1-10 introduces us to the famous "thorn in the flesh." We're never told what it is, presumably some recurring bodily affliction that kept Paul quite humble despite the otherwise remarkable visions that he describes having of the very heavenly throne room of God in this same context. Here again is a key principle for Christian response to suffering:

We are often kept in such humble positions to keep us dependent on God. In fact, the one red-letter verse, the one direct word from Jesus in this entire epistle, comes in verse 9, in which Paul says that His power is made perfect in weakness.

Rather than seeing suffering as something exceptional or unusual, rather than trying to say, as some Christians try to do, that God does not want people to be poor or diseased in any situation and that it is always His will if they have enough faith to overcome this—this verse teaches exactly the opposite. Health and wealth may well be the exceptional situation for the Christian, and situations of suffering the norm.

### C. Conclusion (12:11-13:14)

The rest of 2 Corinthians then gives a miscellany of closing exhortations and greetings, and Paul brings the letter to a close. Overall, 2 Corinthians is one of the strongest statements in Scripture against that attitude which has been called a “triumphalist spirit,” a belief that we can arrive, that we can become spiritually perfect or extremely mature, or attain to some high measure of spiritual blessing in this life. For a whole variety of reasons, God is often much better able to use us in our spiritual and physical weakness.

# Discussion Questions

According to Paul in 2 Corinthians, what is the value of suffering? Illustrate this value from your own life or from the life of another person.

How does Paul describe glory in 2 Corinthians 3? How does he contrast the glory of the old covenant with the glory of the new covenant? What is the significance of this?

According to Paul, how are Christians to respond to suffering? What is the good in responding to suffering in this way? Provide an example of how you or someone you know have/has demonstrated Paul's response to suffering.

# Further Study

## **Suggested reading for this lesson:**

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 57: “When I Am Weak, I Am Strong” (2 Corinthians)

## **Philip Yancey Devotional**

### **Hope During Hard Times - 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:10**

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:8)

Paul blasted anyone who, as the phrase goes, “is too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good.” He did not prepare for the next life by sitting around all day waiting for it to happen. Paul worked as hard as anyone has ever worked, but with a new purpose: “We make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” He sought to do God’s will on earth just as it is done in heaven.

This passage shows that Paul’s hope for the future kept him motivated when the crush of life tempted him to “lose heart.” He wrote this letter just as an intense struggle with the Corinthian church was coming to a head, and as a result it reveals the apostle in one of his lowest, most vulnerable moments. He describes his present state as “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

In typical style, Paul uses a word picture to express his inner thoughts: “treasure in jars of clay.” In his day, jars of clay were nearly as common, and as disposable, as cardboard boxes are today. Beset by difficulties, Paul felt as durable as one of those fragile jars. Yet he recognized that God had chosen to entrust the Gospel, and its good news of forgiveness and eternal life, to such ordinary people as himself.

That insight seemed to give Paul renewed hope. He offers a stirring example of how a future life with God can affect a person on earth: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Life Question: What kind of person would Paul call a success? A failure?

# Glossary

**Chiasmus** — (chiasm) - A Latinized word based on the Greek letter X (“chi”) to symbolize the inverted sequence or cross-over of parallel words or ideas in a bicolon (distich), sentence, or larger literary unit.

**Reconciliation** — The removal of hostility or alienation between two parties. In Scripture, God is the most important offended party with whom humans must be reconciled. He therefore took the initiative to provide the atonement of Christ’s death as the basis for that reconciliation; each individual must make it actual by responding to it (2Co 5:18-21).

# Quiz

1. Chiasmus:
  - A. Is a Latinized word based on the Greek letter X (“chi”)
  - B. Happens when there is an inverted sequence or cross-over of parallel words or ideas
  - C. Can take the form of a-b-b-a
  - D. All of the above
2. How many letters were written between Paul and the Corinthians?
  - A. Two
  - B. Three
  - C. Four
  - D. Five or more
3. In the well-known passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us his “thorn in the flesh” is:
  - A. Some recurring bodily affliction
  - B. An evil spirit
  - C. Human opposition
  - D. None of the above
4. It is believed that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians during his:
  - A. First missionary journey
  - B. Second missionary journey
  - C. Third missionary journey
  - D. First imprisonment
5. Second Corinthians teaches us that God’s power is:
  - A. Something to be boasted about
  - B. Revealed in the Christian church at Corinth
  - C. Made perfect in weakness
  - D. The reason we have faith
6. What does Paul **not** suggest about stewardship in 2 Corinthians?
  - A. Giving should be sacrificial.
  - B. Giving should be done with sincerity.
  - C. Giving should be proportional-the more you have, the greater proportion you give.
  - D. Giving should include ten percent of your income.
7. What does Paul teach about suffering in 2 Corinthians?
  - A. Suffering is always God’s tool of punishment or teaching.
  - B. Suffering will plague us if we lack a right attitude toward God.
  - C. Suffering will happen occasionally, but it needn’t last if we have faith.
  - D. Suffering is the norm-it keeps us dependent on God.

8. What is the meaning of a “triumphalist spirit,” which Paul addresses in 2 Corinthians?
  - A. The belief that we will triumph through faith in Christ
  - B. An attitude that we have “arrived” spiritually
  - C. The belief that we have already won the battle through Christ’s resurrection
  - D. An attitude that exalts spiritual gifts
9. What situation is at the heart of 2 Corinthians 8-9, the focal center of the letter?
  - A. The offering for Jerusalem
  - B. Paul’s thorn in the flesh
  - C. Paul’s apostolic authority
  - D. The coming glory of the Christian life
10. Who does Paul see as his competition in 2 Corinthians?
  - A. False teachers
  - B. The Gnostics
  - C. Troublemakers living in a nearby town
  - D. Lay members of the congregation

Answers: 1. D 2. D 3. D 4. C 5. C 6. D 7. D 8. B 9. A 10. A