

“To Spare You ...”

“But I call God for a witness upon my soul, that to spare you I forbade to come unto Corinth ...” (2 Cor. 1:23).

Already we have seen Paul deal with charges that he was fickle because he did not follow through on a promise he made to visit Corinth, which promise is recorded in his first letter to these brethren. Assumptions and hasty criticism had been made by some and from the attention Paul gives, in this epistle to these dissidents, it is evident that their charges of fickleness truly “stung” him. False teachers were busy at work in Corinth and obviously they had achieved a good deal of success in discrediting Paul and creating suspicion against him in some of the very ones whom he had led to Christ!

After Paul had dealt with a number of issues in the church, he concluded his first letter with instructions about the collection for Jerusalem saints he was working diligently to secure; then he made mention of perhaps an extended stay he might make with them when he completed his gathering of funds for the saints in Jerusalem. Little did he realize that his delayed visit would be fodder for his opponents to seize upon in their constant efforts to set him at naught with the Corinthian brethren.

Thus Paul calls God as his witness that his delay in coming was to “spare them”. In his first letter he had asked, “What then? Shall I come unto you with a rod or in love and a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:21). When the second letter is being ended, Paul writes, “This is the third time I am coming to you. At the mouth of two witnesses or three shall every word be established. I have said beforehand, and I do say beforehand, as when I was present the second time, so now, being absent, to them that have sinned heretofore, and to all the rest, that, if I come again, I will not spare, seeing ye seek a proof of Christ that speaketh in me ...” (2 Cor. 13:1-3). Paul’s delay in going to Corinth was to “spare them” from the rod he warned they might receive when he came, not because he was fickle!

Just what may have been involved in this “rod” would be anyone’s guess. That Paul was able, through the power he had to work miracles, to punish them physically certainly was a possibility. After all, he had smitten the sorcerer prophet Elymas on Cyprus with blindness (Acts 13:8-11). Others he had “punished” although the exact nature of the punishment was unknown. He had “delivered Hymaneus and Alexander ... unto Satan that they might be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:20). Whether this involved more than his severing association with them or more the scriptures do not reveal. The Corinthians were commanded as touching the brother who had taken his father’s wife to “deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:5). This punishment was “inflicted by the many” (2 Cor. 2:6) and consisted of their ceasing of fellowship with him and refraining from any social dealings for they were told “with such a one, no, not to eat” (1 Cor. 5:11). Perhaps Paul was indefinite about what rod he might use so that the uncertainty of it might be a leaven for godly fear to bring repentance because they KNEW WHAT HE COULD DO.

The criticism of Paul's adversaries of Paul's true reason for delaying his visit highlight some important things. First, it shows the ugly side of "judging," which Jesus forbids us to do (Mt. 7:1-3). Their charge of fickleness on Paul's part was but evil surmisings, conceived and nurtured in the hearts of those who despised and denigrated the apostle who had introduced them to the Light of the world! The charge allowed no credit to Paul for better motives, which actually was the case! He wanted to spare them! Out of his noble heart he wished no added hurt to what they had already experienced as the result of the necessary sharpness of his first letter to them. They likely had not considered — certainly they gave him no credit for the great regard with which he wrote that letter to them; that he wrote and dispatched that letter out of much anguish of spirit!

A lesson for us. Do not hastily attribute improper or base motives to another for what he may do. It is true he might act out of selfishness and personal interests, but it is also true that he act with the kindest of intentions and purposes. We are not "heart searchers" — only God can do that. Then, let us let Him search the hearts for He will render to each man according to his works — and THAT INCLUDES US AS WELL.

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