



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sexagesima Sunday, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Today's Communion Epistle – a passage from the 11th chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians – was written by St. Paul in defense his record as an apostle and evangelist. And highly embarrassing he found it.

Paul was a modest man. Never one to blow his own trumpet, he always gave credit for his successes to the Holy Spirit. Yet in Chapters 10 to 13 of the epistle Second Corinthians, Paul actually boasts of his achievements and stakes out his claim to a leading role in church affairs: "[In}nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles."

Indeed, when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian Church, he was fighting for its heart and soul. He was seeking to re-establish Jesus' Gospel as revealed to him personally by Christ, himself, and as affirmed by St. James, St. Peter and the rest of the church leaders at the Council of Jerusalem.

The gospel had been heavily undermined by a group of self-styled apostles, who had come to Corinth from Jerusalem to push their notion that, in order to become Christian, Gentiles first had to convert to Judaism. This was in direct opposition to the Council of Jerusalem. It had ruled that while Jewish Christians should abide by the Law of Moses, Gentiles were not bound to observe the more onerous strictures of the Law – notably dietary laws and requirement for circumcision.

The Council of Jerusalem's position goes to the very core of the Christian gospel. It was based on divine revelation to Paul, following his conversion on the road to Damascus and to St. Peter in a vision on the roof of a house in the town of Joppa,

It echoed the point Jesus had made, time and again, to the Pharisees: A nit-picking adherence to the most minor provisions of the Law actually prevents people from grasping its message.

As Paul regularly explained, Jesus' act of redemption freed us from the "tyranny of the law." In Christ's incarnation and sacrifice of himself, God had established a new covenant with mankind, not just with the Jews but with the gentiles, as well.

Many of the Jewish Christians found this difficult to swallow. They, after all, were God's Chosen People, bound to him by the demanding strictures of the Law of Moses. God surely didn't intend to let the gentiles off so lightly?

The trouble is that they misunderstood their role as the "Chosen People." From the earliest times, the Jews had interpreted this as a mark of divine favoritism. They believed they were especially beloved of God because of their own intrinsic merit – that they had somehow earned God's special favors and blessings.

It is certainly true they were people especially singled out by God, but they owed this special status not because they were in any way exceptional, but because they were so much like the rest of us. God chose them as the means by which to make himself known to the rest of mankind. Their status as "chosen people" was, thus, not so much a mark of special favor as a mark of very special responsibility.

The Jews played a central role in the process of revelation – the gradual exposition of the nature of

God and his relationship with mankind. The history of the Jewish people recorded in the Old Testament enables to study how our relationship with God works. It is, however, the beginning, not the end. The final revelation came in the person of Jesus Christ and the Church he established.

But for Paul's adversaries in Corinth the gospel of Jesus Christ took second place to the Law of Moses. What they didn't seem to realize is that requiring Gentiles to convert to Judaism as a precondition for Baptism runs contrary to the Gospel and implies Jesus' death on the cross was a grisly charade.

In essence, it denied the necessity for Jesus, and Jesus alone, to pay the price for the sins of imperfect mankind. This was necessary because man, being imperfect cannot redeem himself. The price had to be paid by a perfect man and Jesus, the Son of God, is the only perfect man who has ever lived.

Our salvation comes solely through faith in Christ and his sacrifice. And while it is, indeed, necessary for Christians to put their faith into practice by living good Christian lives, performing good works – such as observing the Law of Moses – won't get us to heaven. Indeed, the Law of Moses is so difficult to observe that it illustrates how far we fall short of God's standards of righteousness.

The self-proclaimed apostles in Corinth were, effectively, denying the sufficiency of Christ's redeeming sacrifice. But by the time Paul learned of what was going on a number of the new Greek Christians had actually undergone conversion and were none too keen on imagining they had been fooled.

Sides were taken, and the church was split. Paul's authority and the legitimacy of his teachings were at the center of it. And to his vast embarrassment, he found himself forced to defend his right to preach in a church he, himself, had founded.

Right away Paul found himself at a disadvantage. The Judaizers, as his adversaries are known, were far more impressive men in a physical sense than Paul, who was relatively small in stature and was afflicted with a number of humbling infirmities – among them poor eyesight and a stammer.

Paul's opponents, by contrast, seem to have been fine figures of men, well dressed, and eloquent preachers. They boasted their credentials, their long Jewish lineages, their contacts in Jerusalem, and claimed to having walked and talked with Jesus during his earthly ministry, something, they didn't hesitate to point out, that Paul had never done. And not content with crass self-promotion, they did something human beings often do when trying to argue a weak or rotten case, they resorted to ad hominem personal attacks.

They twisted Paul's words and besmirched his character. They questioned his Jewishness, portrayed his virtues as weaknesses and claimed that his modesty and frugality showed he uncertain about who he was and the Gospel he preached. They alleged he was lazy, ill-educated and cowardly. Most tellingly of all, they made mock of his physical handicaps, his infirmities.

In Second Corinthians, St. Paul tried to defend himself. He denies their lies and distortions. He points out that he received the Gospel he preached directly from Jesus, himself. He challenges his accusers to produce anybody who has worked harder for the faith or suffered for it more than he has.

Far from denying his handicaps, he acknowledges them openly, and gives thanks to God for enabling him to rise above them, and transform them into strengths that witness the power of the gospel: "Most gladly . . . will I glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me," he told the Corinthians, "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distress for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

The lesson to be learned from this is that the Church, though a divine institution, is by no means immune from human ambition, and the strife and hurt it causes. Paul tells us we shouldn't judge a package by its wrapping.

It's not so much what people say that matters, it's how they live and what they do that counts. Above all, one should never be discouraged by setbacks and handicaps. Our efforts to overcome them give us an opportunity to bear witness to the greatness of God. *AMEN.*