

Sunday, July 8, 2012
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Continuing our series on Paul's letters we turn to the closing chapter of 2 Corinthians.

Paul is frustrated with the reports he has received about the behavior of the saints in Corinth.

He is preparing for a third visit, where he plans to address the issues at hand.

Paul's letters are not academic theological discourses.

Rather, they are written in direct response to the behavior of the fledgling church communities.

The reading is from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians 13:1-13.

Sermon - Threats and Blessings

When I read this passage from Paul, I was reminded of that universal parental cry upstairs to restless children, "Don't make me come up there."

My father, who never raised his voice to my sisters and I, used to convey the same message with a long, low whistle.

His whistle from another room would signify that we had reached the limit.

A boundary had been crossed and we had better stop what we were doing and go to bed. It worked.

Paul is at the end of his wits by the time he gets to the conclusion of his second letter to the church at Corinth.

A good portion of this correspondence has been labeled, "a letter of tears."

Paul has such high hopes for his followers, but they continue to succumb to their human frailties.

So Paul resorts to threatening.

He issues stringent, though somewhat vague, warnings about what he will do when he gets there.

He will invoke the power of God in meting out judgment on those who are not living their faith.

He encourages them to examine their lives and to make corrections before he arrives.

His goal is that they will reach 'perfection' by the time he gets into town, thereby relieving him of the responsibility of holding them accountable.

This strategy is a universal one.

One day this past week I read through the headlines in the *New York Times* International section and was alarmed to realize that all of the headings were about someone or some country trying to make someone else do what they wanted.

Syria's Assad Expresses Regret for Shooting of Turkish Warplane

50 Killed in Iraq by Truck Bombs, Explosives and Gunfire

U.S. Adds Forces in Persian Gulf, a Signal to Iran

Pakistan Opens NATO Supply Line as Clinton Apologizes

Chinese City Suspends Factory Construction After Protests

Mali Islamists Exert Control, Attacking Door to a Mosque

China: 2 Neighbors Cautioned Over a Sea Dispute

Myanmar: 30 Arrested in the Killings of Muslims

Somalia: Soldiers Rescue Kidnapped Aid Workers

Each of these headlines told a story of someone with power or a desire for power using violence, threats, and warnings to get what they wanted.

These are all negative incentives.

The sad truth is that humanity has never evolved past the point of using the threat of violence to motivate people into a certain way of thinking and acting.

I reflected on this as I read the Declaration of Independence on Fourth of July.

In reviewing this expertly written document I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if the declaration had been accepted by England.

What if the King had said, "This is a sound argument and the time has come to let the colonists have their own country."

What if all the money we have spent on developing weapons over the past two hundred and thirty-six years had been spent on promoting respect, communication and diplomacy.

When my boys were little and they would get frustrated or angry at something, we would encourage them to 'use words,' rather than striking out or doing something physical.

Paul used words to make his case.

He was the subject of much violence in his life, but there is no record of the early church employing any type of physical coercion to convert followers.

As time went on, the Christian church was responsible for unspeakable violence on a worldwide stage, but that was not the message of Jesus or Paul.

Much of the violence cited in the headlines earlier is rooted in religious belief.

I think we can do better. I think that God expects more of us.

Our goal is not to coerce other people to think like we do.

Our call is to spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

That good news is love, not hate.

At the end of Paul's letter he tries a more encouraging approach:

'Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace.'

He follows with a promise, "The God of love and peace will be with you."

And finally, he concludes with a blessing, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

The declaration of independence ends with:

And for the Support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of DIVINE PROVIDENCE, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honour.

My friends, we are meant to live together in peace with hearts full of love and compassion for our neighbors.

This should be our motivation.

Let Paul's goal of perfection be our goal as well.

Let unbelief be turned to faith, ignorance to knowledge, sickness to health, and brokenness to wholeness, both in us and in our neighbors near and far.

Let us go forward with 'a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence and do the right thing.

We are left with two fundamental questions for discussion today:

What motivates you to do the right thing?

What strategies do you employ to motivate others?

- Threats and warnings
- Positive reinforcement and recognition

- Recognition for your hard work or
- Security for your position
- Love of God