

Doesn't Second Corinthians 13:5 Say We Need to Examine Ourselves to See if We Are Saved?

By Andy Woods

Introduction

Second Corinthians 13:5, one of the most hotly contested verses in the entire Bible says, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" Most understand this verse as exhorting perpetual introspective spiritual analysis to ascertain if one is truly a Christian. This perspective emanates from adherents of Reformed Theology, Lordship Salvation, or Hyper Calvinism. These systems place a premium on perseverance in good works as the authenticating sign of being a genuine believer. They teach that all true believers will inevitably persevere in good works. Thus, ever increasing good works demonstrate the authenticity of someone's spiritual status as a true child of God. If the good works are not plentiful, then perhaps he is not God's true child. Perhaps he is a mere professor of Christ rather than an actual possessor of Him. Thus, in this system, 2 Cor 13:5 means that we should engage in chronic spiritual inventory in order to ascertain the abundance of a changed life and good works. If they are not present, then perhaps we were never saved in the first place.

Leading Lordship Salvation advocate John MacArthur explains:

Doubts about one's salvation are not wrong...Scripture encourages self-examination...In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul wrote, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" That admonition is largely ignored—and often explained away—in the contemporary church.¹

Buswell echoes this sentiment when he says:

But my point is that so long as a professing Christian is in the state of carnality, no pastor, no Christian friend, has the slightest ground for holding that this carnal person has ever been regenerated...it is a pastor's duty to counsel such a person. "You do not give evidence of being in a regenerate state. You must remember Paul's warning, 'Examine

¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, "Follow Me"?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), p. 190.

yourselves whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? You are not reprobate, are you?' (2 Corinthians 13:5)."²

This Reformed perspective negatively impacts pastoral ministry and counseling by throwing believers into doubt about the certainty of their salvation. The Reformed perspective relies heavily upon the admonition of 2 Cor 13:5 to motivate believers to test themselves to see if they possess an authentic rather than a mere spurious faith. Yet, are Reformed theologians using this verse correctly? Are they respecting its context? It is a simple matter to string Bible verses together to support any pre-existing belief system that one desires. For example, it is entirely possible to make it sound as if the Bible promotes suicide. After all, Judas "went and hanged himself" (Matt 27:5), and Jesus said, "You go, and do likewise" (Luke 10:37) and, "What you are going to do, do quickly" (John 13:27)! A text without a context is nothing more than proof text or a pretext for a theological system. Just as the three laws for successful real estate ventures are "location, location, location," the three laws of proper Bible interpretation are "context, context, context." If context is not respected, then the interpreter is in danger of doing *eisegesis*, which involves reading into the passage foreign ideas, rather than *exegesis* or drawing out of the passage what is naturally there.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that 2 Cor 13:5, when understood exegetically and contextually, has nothing to do with self-examination in order to ascertain if we are really Christians. Rather, Paul's intent in this verse is to stimulate Christians to test or examine themselves to discern their level of growth as a Christian. Salvation has *three* distinct phases. *First*, justification is the heavenly announcement of positional righteousness the moment we trust Christ. *Second*, progressive sanctification involves learning to draw upon divine resources, such as the Spirit, so that our daily lives gradually become Christ-like. *Third*, glorification occurs when we are liberated from our present bodies, which retain a propensity for sin, at the moment of death. Comprehending these phases is necessary to properly interpret 2 Cor 13:5. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, Paul here is establishing a test for progressive sanctification rather than for determining past justification. Let us now examine *nine* reasons supporting this contention.

The Corinthians' Assumed Believing Status

First, throughout the Corinthian letters, Paul assumes or presupposes the saved or believing status of the Corinthian church he is addressing. Since this is the case, why would Paul at the end of these letters suddenly switch horses in midstream and challenge his readers to test themselves to see if they are really Christians at all? Such an abrupt and awkward conclusion would be out of harmony with the overall tone and tenor of these letters. Notice a few verses from the

² James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), p. 147.

Corinthian letters showing Paul believed that the Corinthians were regenerate.³ First Corinthians 1:2: "To the *church* of God that is in Corinth, to those *sanctified in Christ Jesus*, called to be *saints* together with all those who in every place *call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, both *their Lord and ours*" (see also 1 Cor 3:1, 5; 6:11, 19-20). Second Corinthians 1:1 says, "To the *church of God* that is at Corinth, with all the *saints* who are in the whole of Achaia" (see also 2 Cor 1:21-22, 24; 3:2-3; 6:14-16; 8:9; 10:15). Note Hodges's appropriate comments on 2 Cor 13:5:

Regrettably...these forceful words have been sadly misconstrued. They have been read by some interpreters as though they were a challenge to the Corinthians to find out whether they were really saved or not! This is unthinkable. After twelve chapters in which Paul takes their Christianity for granted, can he only now be asking them to make sure they are born again?...Let the readers of this book examine 2 Corinthians on their own. They will see clearly how often the apostle affirms in one way or another his conviction that his readers are genuinely Christian.⁴

Proving Oneself Applies to the Believer

Second, the notion of testing, examining, or proving oneself is an idea that applies to an authentic believer whose salvation is not in doubt. Second Corinthians 13:5 says, "test yourselves." The word translated "test" (ESV), "examine" (NASB), or "prove" (KJV) is the Greek verb *dokimazō*. The adjectival form of the word is *dokimos*, which can be applicable to a genuine believer. In fact, Paul applied this very word to Timothy in 2 Tim 2:15: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." The word translated "approved" here is the Greek adjective *dokimos*. Timothy was obviously a true believer. In fact, Timothy was Paul's son in the faith (1 Tim 1:2). Paul would not have installed Timothy as the pastor at Ephesus if the apostle had any lingering doubts about Timothy's salvation.

Interestingly, Paul even applies this very word *dokimos* to himself just two verses following his exhortation for the Corinthians to examine themselves. Second Corinthians 13:7 says, "...not that we may appear to have met the test..." Paul himself was obviously an authentic believer, yet he had no problem applying the adjectival form of *dokimazō* to himself just as he also applied it to his protégé Timothy. Wilkin explains how the notion of "approval" conveyed through *dokimazō* and *dokimos* is a concept that is applicable to a true believer.

Acceptance and approval are two different things. God accepts all believers solely on the basis of their faith in Christ...Approval requires more than faith. It is conditioned upon spiritual maturity and is not a once-for-all event. A believer who is approved today

³ In these citations, I took the liberty of italicizing certain words and phrases that show that the justified status of the Corinthians was never something that Paul second-guessed.

⁴ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), p. 200.

is not guaranteed approval this time next year. Remaining in a state of Christ's approval is contingent upon continuing to confess Christ in word and deed...⁵

Disqualification Applies to the Believer

Third, the idea of disqualification is applicable to authentic believers whose salvation is not in doubt. The last clause in 2 Cor 13:5 says, "unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" The word translated "fail to meet the test" (ESV) or "disqualified" (NKJV) is the Greek adjective *adokimos*. This word is used two other times in the immediate context (2 Cor 13:6-7). Here, Paul applies the word to himself as he explains that he had not failed the test (v 6) despite the fact that the Corinthians thought he had (v 7). First Corinthians 9:27 is the only other place where Paul uses this same word in the Corinthian letters: "But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." Paul again applies this very adjective to himself. What did Paul fear that might disqualify him? He never doubted the genuineness of his salvation. In 2 Tim 1:12 he explained, "...for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." Dillow notes, if *adokimos* or *disqualified* here means that "...the apostle Paul was not certain that he would go to heaven...one wonders...how any Christian in the history of the church could ever know for certain that God was his Father!"⁶

Rather, 1 Cor 9:27 is a rewards context. If disciplining one's body and keeping it under control is what gains justification, then justification would be by works and would no longer be by faith alone. Such an idea would contradict what Paul taught so forcefully elsewhere (Rom 3:28; Eph 2:8-9). On the contrary, Paul buffeted his body so as to gain a reward above and beyond salvation. Paul was concerned about being disqualified from this prize or reward. Paul (1 Cor 3:15) and others (2 John 8; Rev 3:11) explain that rewards can be forfeited. Morris summarizes, "'Castaway' is too strong for *adokimos*. The word means 'which has not stood the test,' and in this context refers to disqualification. Paul's fear was not that he might lose his salvation, but that he might lose his crown through failing to satisfy his Lord (cf. 3:15)."⁷ Thus, the mere existence of *adokimos* conveying disqualification in 2 Cor 13:5 is insufficient grounds for interpreting it as exhorting believers to second guess the authenticity of their salvation. The word's presence here merely communicates concern about losing out on an additional blessing or reward.

"In the Faith" Refers to Maturity Rather than Position

Fourth, the expression, "in the faith," refers to a test for spiritual growth rather than a test of authentic justification. Second Corinthians 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you

⁵ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 65-66.

⁶ Dillow, *Final Destiny*, p. 449.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commenatry Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 140.

are in the faith." The Reformed position understands the imperative verb *examine* alongside the prepositional phrase, "in the faith" to mean that self-examination is necessary in order to discern if we have truly received justification. However, it is more probable to understand this phrase as pertaining to one's development in progressive sanctification rather than position.⁸ Rather than interpreting "the faith" as one's positional justification, Wilkin notes, "'The faith' is the body of truth that has been delivered to us from God."⁹

Outside of 2 Cor 13:5, Paul used the identical prepositional expression, "in the faith" (*en tē pistei*) with a verb three other times. In each instance, Paul was speaking of an experience with Christ rather than one's position in Christ (1 Cor 16:13; Col 2:7; Titus 1:13). Sometimes Paul used a verb alongside the nearly identical phrase, "the faith," without the preposition, "in" (Rom 14:1; Col 1:23). Other times he used the similar phrase, "in faith," without the definite article, *the* (1 Tim 1:2; 3:13). In each case, Paul was speaking of the believer's experience or progressive sanctification rather than his position.

Outside of Paul's writings, we find other examples of a verb used alongside the similar phrase, "the faith," without the preposition, *in* (Acts 14:22; 16:5; 1 Pet 5:9). These examples also relate to growth in the faith rather than position in Christ. Also, in the same letter, in 2 Cor 1:24, Paul uses the nearly identical expression, "for you stand firm in your faith." Regarding 2 Cor 13:5, Dillow notes, "Earlier in this same epistle Paul uses the term in the sense of 'standing firm' in the faith...in one's Christian walk, not in the sense of possessing salvation."¹⁰ Thus, regarding the verb *examine* alongside the phrase, "in the faith," in 2 Cor 13:5, Lowery concludes:

Paul's question is usually construed with regard to positional justification: were they Christians or not? But it more likely concerned practical sanctification: did they demonstrate that they were in the faith (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13) and that Christ was in them by their obeying His will? To stand the test was to do what was right. To fail was to be disobedient and therefore subject to God's discipline.¹¹

"Christ in You" Relates to Progressive Sanctification

Fifth, "Christ in you" can relate to progressive sanctification. Second Corinthians 13:5 states, "Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" The Reformed interpretation understands the phrase, "Christ in you," as pertaining to becoming a Christian in the first place. However, this phrase can also be understood as growth in Christ related to greater maturation and development in one's progressive sanctification. For example, in Gal 4:19, Paul writes, "my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" Here, Paul speaks of spiritual childbirth not in terms of justification since he was addressing a believing audience (Gal 3:3; 4:6). Rather, he was speaking of growth in terms of

8 Wilkin, pp. 64-65, 255-56.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

10 Dillow, p. 448.

11 David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1983), pp. 584-85.

progressive sanctification. Interestingly, Paul uses the similar expression "Christ in me" of himself just a few verses earlier (2 Cor 13:3). Dillow notes:

...Paul's reference to Christ "through me" in verse 3 does not refer to salvation but to demonstration of powerful speech and deeds. Similarly, the test they are to perform to see if Christ is "in you" (2 Corinthians 13:5) is not to discover if they are saved but whether Christ is manifesting Himself in their works and deeds. Paul...doubts that Christ is in them in this sense. Salvation is not in view at all.¹²

Moreover, when Jesus said, "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4), He was not speaking of initial faith in Christ but rather continued growth and intimacy with Him. Because Judas, the only unbeliever among the disciples (John 13:10-11), had already left the Upper Room (John 13:29-31), Jesus was speaking only to the remaining eleven who had already believed (John 15:3). Although the Greek word *menō* translated "abide" can sometimes refer to initial faith resulting in justification in John's Gospel (John 6:56),¹³ other times it refers to development in Christ or progressive sanctification (John 8:31). Thus, in 2 Cor 13:5, Paul exhorts his readers to test themselves to see if Christ is in them, that is, whether they are making progress in the second tense of their salvation.

The Test of Justification View Destroys the Passage's Symmetry

Sixth, the notion that Paul posed a test to determine the authenticity of one's salvation in 2 Cor 13:5 destroys the symmetry of the passage. Apparently, the Corinthians had challenged Paul for proof or *dokimē* (2 Cor 13:3) that Christ was "in" him (2 Cor 13:3) and that he had not been disqualified or *adokimos* (2 Cor 13:6-7). Paul, who sometimes employed sarcasm when dealing with the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:8), effectively turned the tables on them. Consequently, in 2 Cor 13:5, Paul challenged them on these very same issues. He demanded proof (*dokimazō*) that Christ was "in" them and wondered if they had been disqualified (*adokimos*). Dillow notes the nexus between verse 3 and verse 5 as follows:

The word "yourselves" is first in order in the Gr. sentence; it is emphatic. He is referring back to verse 3, in which he wrote, "you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me." Then in verse 5 Paul turns the thought around on them. "You, yourselves, should test yourselves to see if he is really speaking *in you*."¹⁴

Given this symmetry, in order to discern Paul's point in verse 5, we only need ask on what basis did the Corinthians challenge Paul? The Corinthians never challenged Paul's salvation, but rather whether he had the requisite apostolic authority and spiritual authority necessary to correct

12 Dillow, p. 449.

13 Editor's Note: Another grace centered view regarding John 6:56 is that it too refers to things related to progressive sanctification. See comments on *trōgō* in Hawley, *The Guts of Grace*, p. 126.

14 Dillow, p. 448. Emphasis in original.

them. Thus, when Paul challenged the Corinthians in verse 5, he is not second-guessing their saved state but rather their immaturity or lack of development in their progressive sanctification.¹⁵ In other words, to contend, as the Reformed perspective does, that Paul is questioning the Corinthians' salvation is to ignore the basic symmetry of the passage.

Only Believers Experience Discipline

Seventh, the test of justification view ignores the reality that only a believer is a candidate for discipline. What if the Corinthians were to fail the test that Paul posed for them in verse 5? Then, they would become candidates for divine discipline. This is perhaps why Paul briefly mentions the number of witnesses that are necessary to impose church discipline back in verse 1 (Matt 18:16). Both discipline imposed by the church (1 Cor 5:5) and by God Himself (1 Cor 11:30-32) is a dominant theme in Paul's Corinthian letters. As Lowery regarding verse 5 observes, "To fail was to be disobedient and therefore subject to God's discipline."¹⁶ This notion of failure of a spiritual test resulting in divine discipline would be nonsensical if the justified status of the Corinthians was at issue. Discipline is something that is imposed on the believer rather than the unbeliever. Divine discipline is a sign that one is already God's child (Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19).

Scripture Nowhere Tells Believers to Test the Authenticity of Their Faith

Eighth, nowhere in Scripture are believers told to test themselves to determine if they are true Christians. Therefore, if Paul was imposing a test for justification in verse 5, this would be a first and would be a teaching that is found nowhere else in the Bible. Even the oft-cited Matt 7:20-23 passage, when studied in context, is not for the believer to ascertain the authenticity of his own faith, but rather is to determine if someone is a false teacher (Matt 7:15).¹⁷ Dillow explains:

Nowhere in the Bible is a Christian asked to examine either his faith or his life to find out if he is a Christian. He is told only to look outside of himself to Christ alone for his assurance that he is a Christian. The Christian is, however, often told to examine his *walk of faith* and life to see if he is walking in fellowship and in conformity to God's commands.¹⁸

Hodges similarly notes:

How strange that in our day and time we have been told so often that fruitlessness is a sure sign that a person is unsaved. Certainly we did not get this idea from the Bible. Rather, the Bible teaches that unfruitfulness in a believer is a sure sign that one is no longer moving forward, no longer growing in Christ. It is a sign that the Christian is spiritually sick, and until well again, cannot enjoy spiritual success.¹⁹

15 Wilkin, pp. 66-67.

16 Lowery, p. 585.

17 See Editor, "Didn't Jesus Say, 'You Will Recognize Them by Their Fruits'?" in this book.

18 Dillow, p. 454.

19 Hodges, p. 118.

The Reformed View Damages Assurance of Salvation

Ninth, the test of justification view destroys the believer's assurance of salvation. If the Reformed interpretation of 2 Cor 13:5 is correct and believers are to engage in perpetual self-examination in order to ascertain if they are truly believers, then one can never know with certainty whether he is truly saved. Nagging doubts about this issue would perpetually cloud the believer's mind all his days. Such a mindset contradicts the explicit Biblical promises of assurance (John 6:47; 1 John 5:13). In John 5:24, Christ promised, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but *has passed* from death to life" (emphasis added). *Has* is a present tense verb communicating that eternal life becomes a present reality at the point of faith in Christ. "Has passed from" is a verb in the perfect tense communicating a onetime past event with ongoing benefits in the present. Such language hardly communicates the persistent entertainment of doubts about one's salvation. Lest one think that assurance of salvation is a new and aberrant teaching, it is found in the doctrinal statements of leading evangelical institutions. Article 11 of the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement, entitled "Assurance," states:

We believe it is the privilege, not only of some, but of *all* by the Spirit through faith who are born again in Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, to be *assured* of their salvation from the *very day* they take Him to be their Savior and that this assurance is *not* founded upon any fancied discovery of their *own worthiness* or fitness, but *wholly* upon the testimony of God in His *written Word*...²⁰

Conclusion

Although 2 Cor 13:5 is frequently used by Reformed theologians as a test for the validity of one's status as a child of God, such a theological proposition is not borne out by a careful exegesis of the text. Nine reasons have been offered in support of this contention. The Corinthian audience's regenerated state is already presumed. Phrases such as, "prove," "disqualification," "in the faith," and, "Christ in you," are applicable to authentic believers. The Reformed view also ignores the passage's symmetry, divine discipline as applying only to the believer, and that Scripture nowhere else harmonizes with the Reformed view's interpretation about a person testing himself to determine if he is truly saved. Finally, the Reformed interpretation destroys the believer's assurance of salvation. Rather than conveying a test for determining the validity of one's justification, in actuality, 2 Cor 13:5 serves as a test to determine ones development or growth in the middle tense of salvation, otherwise known as progressive sanctification.

20 See <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/> (accessed Nov. 28th, 2014). Emphasis added.