

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Paul's Reluctance to Boast

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11:16-21

Code: 47-78

Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 11 as we continue drawing toward the end of the study of 2 Corinthians, we come now to verses 16 through 21....2 Corinthians 11:16 through 21. And as I said, it is in theological content really a sort of a meager text. In terms of great historic import, it lacks. In terms of profound far-reaching height, depth and breadth of spiritual impact, it lacks. And yet when you've said all of that you still have the Word of the living God and what is not apparent on the surface, I hope the Spirit of God will allow us to discover as we look a little deeper. Let me read the text to you, verses 16 to 21.

"Again I say, let no one think me foolish, but if you do receive me even as foolish that I also may boast a little. That which I'm speaking I'm not speaking as the Lord would, but as in foolishness in this confidence of boasting. Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also, for you being so wise bear with the foolish gladly. For you bear with anyone. If he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face, to my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison. But in whatever respect anyone else is bold, I speak in foolishness, I'm just as bold myself."

Paul has been forced to boast. By that I mean he's been forced to defend his apostleship. He has been forced not to overstate the case but to speak the truth. He has been forced to identify himself as a true apostle and to give his credentials. He's been forced to do that because false apostles have come to Corinth and told the people that he was a fraud, a liar and a charlatan. And the people have, in some measure, believed the false apostles. False teachers, liars, false prophets, false apostles all attempt to destroy the truth and in order to destroy the truth, you have to discredit the truth teachers. And so they came into Corinth and then attempted to destroy Paul's credibility. As a result, he has to defend himself. In fact, he has to defend himself against their specific accusations. He has to take them on.

He hates that. He resents it. He does not like to defend himself. He's very comfortable talking about his weaknesses. In fact, he's happy to do that. He's very comfortable talking about his inabilities. He's very comfortable saying he's the chief of sinners. He's very comfortable saying that he is what he is by the grace of God and the grace of God alone. He's very comfortable saying that he is a clay pot, a garbage bucket. He's very comfortable saying he is a former blasphemer, injurious persecutor,

murderer, enemy of Jesus Christ whom God saved graciously and thrust into ministry. He's very glad to talk about that. But he has almost an impossible time talking in a boastful way about his credentials.

Now we know he's not going to say more than is true because back in chapter 10 he says, "If I have to boast," verse 13, "I will not boast beyond our measure, but only within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us." Verse 14, "We will not overextend ourselves." Verse 15 again, "Not boasting beyond our measure." But even boasting in proper boundaries, even boasting about what God has done in and through him and about his call and about his credentials, as true as it is is still very difficult. And it's difficult because the man is so devoted to humility and he sees all boasting as folly and fleshly. In fact, there really are only two points in these verses and the two points would be these; boasting is foolish, and boasting is fleshly. That's what he's saying. And yet he is forced to do it not for his own sake but for the sake of the truth. He must reaffirm to these people who have doubted his credentials that he is in fact God's spokesman, the true apostle who presents the true gospel and they must listen. Paul is committed to humility. Numerous times in his epistles he vouches for it. In fact, it is identified in the Scriptures as the noblest of Christian virtues.

Scripture teaches, for example, that those who manifest humility will be heard by God when they pray. They will be delivered by God when they are in trouble. They have the privilege of enjoying the very presence of God. They will be honored by God. They will enjoy a long and prosperous life. They will be the object of God's special attention and personal care. They will be lifted up and exalted by God. They will be the greatest in His Kingdom. They will receive the fullness of His grace. They will inherit the earth and get eternal glory. All that for the humble.

On the other hand, the Bible is very clear in saying pride is a sin. Pride is hateful to God. Pride is reflective of self-righteousness and an unsanctified heart. Scripture says that pride is forbidden because it defiles the person, hardens the mind, hinders the knowledge of God, retards spiritual development, leads people to contempt for God's Word and God's servants, produces anger, contentiousness, envy, jealousy and self-deception. Those guilty of pride are warned in Scripture that God will resist them, judge them, punish them and destroy them. No wonder the writer of Proverbs said, "It is better to be of humble spirit with the lowly than with the proud."

Paul knew all of that. And all of those considerations help us to understand the importance of humility, and therefore the importance of it to Paul. Paul, frankly, apart from Jesus Himself, is the greatest New Testament model of humility. In fact, he did what is very difficult to do. In Acts chapter 20 he was speaking to the Ephesian elders and he told them he was humble. That's hard without losing at the same moment your humility. He says in Acts 20:19 that they knew from the first day they ever met him that he was serving the Lord not with some humility but with all humility. When a

man can say to his people, "Follow the pattern of my humility," he has...he has really set the course for his life. If he's going to maintain his integrity then, he has to maintain his humility. Paul sought that. He sought to be truly humble. He learned it from Jesus who said, "Learn of Me for I am meek and lowly," Matthew 11. He learned it from Jesus of whom Paul wrote, "He thought it not something to grasp to be equal with God," Philippians 2, "but gave it up and took upon Himself the form of a man and humbled Himself even to death." Paul said, "Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ," and that had to do with his humility too. Christ was humble, perfectly humble, and Christ was the pattern that Paul followed. And the whole idea of boasting in that context was repulsive to him. He saw it as foolish and fleshly. But here he is about to boast. He doesn't start it really till verse 22, he just can't get to it. It's so distasteful that he just keeps talking about other things and he keeps giving disclaimers because he wants so not to be under...misunderstood.

Now remember, his apostolic credentials were under massive assault by the false teachers. These agents of Satan had come into Corinth with their different Jesus, their different Spirit and their different gospel, as he says back in verse 4. They came with satanic lies. They were disguised as angels of light, as messengers of Christ, as servants of righteousness, but they were not. And so they came attacking Paul, trying to discredit his authority, his morality, his message, his integrity. They criticized his person. They criticized his style. They criticized his preaching. They said he lacked the necessary charm and attractiveness as well as the preaching ability to appeal to the sophisticated Greeks. They said religious leaders, great men, men who are...who generate movements are not ordinary men, and Paul is a very ordinary man. If he was really a man of God, if he was really the man to bring the gospel to the Gentile world, if he was to be in such a tremendously strategic place of leadership, if he was a genuine apostle he should have a superior personality. He should be a momentarily great speaker. He should almost be divine. He should have demonstrated superior transcendent, almost magical powers and be able to do mysterious and inexplicable wonders. He should have lived above the normal trials of lesser men, above the sufferings and the pains of the hoi polloi. He should have triumphantly risen above the common mundane tasks of life and here he was working with leather and making tents, how demeaning. He should have had amazing experiences with God. He should have been strong and dominating and high priced and forceful. He should have been physically imposing, if not physically perfect since the Greeks despised any bodily weakness or physical deformity. He should have been heroic. He should have been athletic. He should have been proud and confident, even arrogant. And he was absolutely none of those things. He just didn't fit the model.

And unfortunately, the Corinthians bought these assaults and began to think of Paul as, "Yeah, he's really not what he ought to be, he's not imposing, he's not wealthy, he's not confident, he's not transcendent, he's not dynamic, he's not arrogant about his exploits in his achievements...he's just...he's just plain, common. And his message is this one-dimensional talking about the cross of Christ.

And so the Corinthian false apostles used all of this to manipulate the minds of the church into thinking Paul was a fraud. They, on the other hand, were the super-apostles who had everything he lacked. And the church had begun manifesting dangerous gullibility. They were buying into the deception and Paul was left really no choice but to defend himself. And he hates it...he hates it. He has said before that he is a clay pot, that he's a garbage bucket, that he's nothing, he's a nobody. He even said that. But he's forced to defend himself. And here then, beloved, is the real measure of a person's humility, can you boast and stay humble at the same time? That's the real test of humility. Not can you survive your failures, but can you survive your successes and be humble. Anybody can be humble in his failures. Anybody can be humble in neutral. But Paul hadn't lived a failing life and he hadn't lived in neutral. He had lived an eminently successful and blessed life and the question was, "Could he defend himself, say what was actually true and be humble at the same time?" It's not an easy challenge and he knew it. But as we shall see as we get into this defense, starting in verse 22 and it runs all the way to verse 13 of chapter 12, he does it. In fact, the more he gives his apostolic credentials the more humble you recognize he was. It is an amazing passage. It is the most unique and powerful example of humility in the Bible because it is a man demonstrating his humility when he has to boast about himself. And that's the test.

As we pick up the text in verse 16 Paul picks up the theme of foolishness again. He launched that theme in verse 1. "I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness." He thinks the whole idea of defending himself is just plain foolish. It's just foolish. "But it has become a necessary folly." So here he is, he's going to boast. He has to, but another disclaimer about how foolish it is seems necessary to him. So verse 16 he says, "Again I say, I said it once back in verse 1, I'll say it again, let no one think me foolish but if you do and admittedly I do, receive me even as foolish that I also may boast a little."

I just have to do this. I just have to do it. I have to answer a fool according to his folly, as Proverbs 26:5 says. It's a kind of insanity but I have to do it. So if you think me foolish, I wish you didn't, but if you think me foolish, I understand. Frankly, I think me foolish too, but would you endure it anyway? And would you please acknowledge what I say as you acknowledge what the false apostles said? It is a necessary foolishness. I just need to boast a little. And he uses the word *mikron*. His enemies had boasted a lot. They had boasted endlessly and greatly, forcing him to boast just a little. He's saying, "Look, I know it's foolish. I know you know it's foolish. I want you to know I know it's foolish also. I don't have a choice."

Boasting was natural to false apostles, it always is. It's natural to all fakes and frauds and false teachers and false preachers and false apostles. But it's utterly unnatural to Paul. He's like an actor playing a reluctant role to make a point. It's not him, but he's going to do it. And thus he sets up his

defense with this disclaimer that it is folly.

Then in verses 17 and 18 he does something quite interesting. He says in this interesting parenthesis, there's something else that I must say by way of disclaimer, too. "That which I am speaking...verse 17...I am not speaking as the Lord would, but as in foolishness in this confidence of boasting. Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also." This is a most fascinating section. That which I am speaking...what I'm going to say to you in this necessary boast, I am not speaking as the Lord would.

What in the world are you talking about, Paul? Just this, I'm not following any example Jesus ever gave. And that is what was crushing about this. That's what was so hard for him. Because, you see, he was the man who said, "For to me to live is Christ." He was the man who said, "Be ye followers of me as I am of Christ." He was the man who said, "If I live I live unto the Lord, if I die I die unto the Lord, so whether I live or die I am the Lord's." He is the man who said, "I press toward the goal and the goal is Christ's likeness." He wanted to be like Christ, that was the passion of his life. And he had no model of Christ ever doing this. There is no example of Christ ever boasting. It was Christ who said He was meek and lowly. He had referred, as I noted earlier, back in chapter 10 verse 1 to the meekness of Christ. Even when He was being ridiculed, persecuted, executed there was never any self-defensive boast. This bothers Paul. He doesn't like boasting in the first place because it is foolish. He doesn't like it in the second place because he has no model from Christ to follow. All Christ ever did when He was falsely accused was take it in silence. And it bothers him that he has to do this. It's not the example of Christ that he's following. This is what crushed him, it's the example of his enemies. They have dictated what he has to do, not Christ. And that is hard for him.

As a footnote, may I suggest something to you? Godless, unbelieving people who call themselves Bible scholars have used verse 17 to teach that Paul didn't claim to be inspired by God, that when Paul said, "That which I'm speaking I'm not speaking as the Lord would," Paul is putting a disclaimer on everything he wrote and saying none of it came from God. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul himself said, "All Scripture is inspired by God." And what Paul wrote was Scripture.

Listen to what Peter said, 2 Peter 3, "Regard to the patience of our Lord and salvation," he says, "just as our beloved brother Paul according to the wisdom given him wrote to you,," Paul wrote wisdom given to him by God. "So also in all his letters." It was all wisdom given to him by God. "Speaking in them of these things in which are some things hard to understand which the untaught and unstable distort as they do also the rest of the Scriptures to their own destruction."

What is he saying? Paul wrote wisdom given to him, he identifies it in verse 16 as the Scriptures. Paul wrote Scripture and all Scripture is inspired by God. It is the untaught and the unstable who

distort Scripture to their own destruction. And unstable, untaught critics have distorted, verse 17, in an attempt to discredit New Testament inspiration. That's now what it's saying. He's simply saying I can't follow the model of Christ in this because Christ neither boasted in self-defense, nor did He teach His disciples to do so.

So, he says, I'm just speaking in foolishness in this confidence of boasting. In my confident boasting, I confess it's foolish. I really have been forced to a lower standard than my Lord, and so it is a kind of folly but a necessary folly. Why necessary? Verse 18, "Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also." The "many" here are the false apostles. They are the same many in chapter 2 verse 17, "We are not like the many peddling the Word of God. But as from sincerity as from God we speak in Christ." The many were the false teachers, were hucksters and con-men. Here he says, "The many are forcing me to this folly, it's not something that Christ gave me a pattern for, I'm having to follow their lead."

His reluctance is understandable. Their boast was according to the flesh. What does that mean? What does that mean? Just according to their human achievements. They weren't boasting about what God had done for them. They were not boasting about what God had done in them. They were not boasting about what God had done through them. Why? Because He hadn't done anything. They weren't believers. They had a different Jesus, back to verse 4, they had a different Spirit than the Holy Spirit, and they had a different gospel. They didn't even know God, God wasn't even operating in their lives. All they had was fleshly boasts. They could only boast about their personal achievements and their personal privileges motivated by their corrupt desires and by Satan who was their father. Paul hates the fact that such have forced him into this necessity.

I'll tell you, that is a very hard place to be. When you are falsely accused by the enemies of the church, when people ridicule and say things about you that are not true and you're forced into some necessary self-defense for the preservation of the truth, and you know that 1 Peter 2:23 says that when Jesus was reviled, He reviled not again, and did nothing more than to commit Himself to a faithful creator and left it to God. But Paul and us sometimes are forced to a reasonable and honest and fair defense. But it's never a happy occasion. You never feel good about it. It's not sin, but Paul says it's just folly. Never, I say again, do we see his humility more clearly than in his reluctance to boast. And especially when you see the way he boasts.

Well you think that maybe he's given enough disclaimers, he's got one more and this is directed right at the Corinthians in the most strong terms possible, sarcasm. Sarcasm is the strongest force that language can bear. It's the strongest force of ridicule. It's, "Well, aren't you something?" and when you mean by that the very opposite. Sarcasm is saying the opposite of what is true for effect. That is a cutting use of language, sarcasm, irony, biting. And that's what Paul uses in verse 19. It's a very good form of language if you want to get across a point. It's not new to Paul. Back in 1 Corinthians

he was questioning their wisdom, he really was. First Corinthians chapter 3 verse 18, "If any man among you thinks that he is wise," and there were some in there, they thought they were real smart, "then let him become foolish that he might really become wise." You'd think you...the Corinthians really thought they...they were sort of spiritual smart alecks. They thought they were real smart and Paul had to confront that. Chapter 6, "You're so wise," he says, "you're going to sue each other, isn't there one among you wise enough to decide these things, since you're so wise?" Chapter 8 he says in verse 2, "If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he hasn't yet known what he ought to know." You know-it-all, you think you're so wise. Chapter 13 he says to them, sort of sarcastically, "I don't care if you speak with the tongues of men and angels, if you don't have love you're nothing."

They thought they had it all. They really did. And in chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians he takes them on with very sarcastic language. First Corinthians 4:8, "You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us." You know what he means by that? He means you're empty, poor slaves. It's all sarcasm. Aren't you something? You've got it all. You have become rich. You have become kings without us. I wish you had become kings. And look at us, what are we? Verse 10, "We're fools and you are wise, we're weak and you are strong. You're distinguished and we're without honor. And to this present hour we're hungry and thirsty and poorly clothed and roughly treated and homeless and we toil and we work with our hands and we're reviled. And when we are we bless and we're persecuted, and when we are we endure and we're slandered, and we try to conciliate or make peace, even when we're slandered. And we're the scum of the world and we're the dregs and you're the kings and you're everything." Boy, what a sarcastic attack.

And he comes right back to that kind of sarcasm here. And he says this, "For you," verse 19, "being so wise bear with the foolish gladly." You ought to bear with me if I'm foolish, you do real well with fools. Evidence? You've just listened to the false apostles. You're so wise, aren't you? So smart. You do real well with fools. How wise you are, so wise to gladly hear fools. That's real wisdom, isn't it? You're so wise you tolerate liars, maybe you'll tolerate a fool like me. How foolish are you really? Verse 20, "You're so foolish you bear with the foolish gladly, if he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face. You're so smart, aren't you? So smart you've been enslaved, exploited and trapped, dominated and humiliated. Real smart."

You've been enslaved...that's what he says in verse 20. You bear with anyone if he enslaves you. Somebody might say, "Well, is that talking about bringing them out of freedom in Christ into the bondage of Judaism?" Could be. Could be that they brought some Jewish legalism along, some stuff about circumcision, or some stuff about observing the Jewish law. Probably not the issue of circumcision in this case, but some other kinds of legalism, could be. But I think more than that it's typical of all false teachers, all cultic leaders that they wind up exercising control over people that turns people into slaves. They manipulate them to serve their ends and their motives. You've let

those false apostles enslave you, that's how smart you are. And then you've let them exploit you. He means that when he says if he devours you, it's used in Luke 20:47, "For the Pharisees devouring widows houses," which means they went to the widows and took their money. Not only do they manipulate you and get you completely under their control, but they take away your money and your possessions. They're like parasites. False apostles, false preachers, cult leaders, whatever they are, they're like...they're like leeches who suck the life out of their victims. Have you noticed all the prosperity preachers get rich? All the cult leaders become rich at the expense of their followers.

Thirdly, you've been entrapped. That's what...if he takes advantage of you means. Now you're caught like a sucker fish who buys the bait and is caught. Like an animal who comes to the trap and sticks his nose in there to get the bait and is caught. You've been baited by what appears to look good only to be caught in their trap. And now you're just meat for them. You've been dominated. It says, "If he exalts himself, you bear it." What does that mean? Well that simply speaks of the domination aspect of false teachers, they are controlling, they exercise abusive authority. They lord it over people, as it's mentioned in 1 Peter 5:3. Matthew 20 verse 25, a good verse to look up, "The Gentiles dominate you." Gentile leadership is a leadership of domination. You're so smart you've allowed these false teachers to come in, enslave you, exploit you, and trap you and dominate you. And then lastly, humiliate you. If he hits you in the face, you take it.

You know, in the ancient world this was...this was common, probably more common than it is today when we have the kind of little more cultured society in some respects, or at least a fear of litigation. But in ancient times people punched people. In 1 Kings 22 you have an illustration of it, you can look it up some time. Zedekiah was a false prophet, he was the spokesman for the false prophets and Zedekiah came face-to-face with Micaiah who was the true prophet of God and in response to Micaiah's message, Zedekiah hauled off and hit him in the mouth, struck him in the face for his perceived insolence in claiming to speak for God. He was struck in the face by a false prophet. False prophets can get very, very angry. I had one say on television about me that if he had his way he'd get his Holy Ghost machine gun and blow my brains out. There's a great amount of contempt on the part of false prophets because they're afraid of any invasion into their domain. Jesus, of course, claiming to be the King was smashed in the face in Luke 22 verses 63 to 65 by those who were mocking Him. Acts 23 records a similar striking. And that's why in 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7 it says that an elder can't be a striker, pugnacious. In the ancient world things were not always solved by quiet negotiation. False teachers sometimes used physical, corporeal abuse to get control of their people.

It also may refer just to the general disrespect and contempt apart from the physical abuse. And even though Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:39 taught us to turn the other cheek, He never taught us to accept that tyranny as anything other than sin. Paul says you just take it all. Ah,

you're so wise, wise enough to endure all of that from false teachers.

Well, verse 21, here's the last verse in his disclaimer, more biting sarcasm, "To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison." This is so sarcastic. He means the opposite. Paul could have told the Corinthians, "You ought to be ashamed, folks. You really ought to be ashamed. You ought to be ashamed for disgracing yourselves. You ought to be ashamed for your stupidity in gladly receiving those lying false apostles, you ought to take another look and realize how stupid you are for getting yourself enslaved, exploited and trapped, dominated and humiliated." But instead, he makes the point stronger by sarcasm and says, "I ought to be ashamed for being so weak, I am just so weak as evidenced by the fact that I didn't do that. I'm so weak I didn't come in and I didn't enslave you. I didn't entrap you. I didn't manipulate you. I didn't intimidate you. I didn't abuse you. I didn't take advantage of you. I didn't exploit you. I didn't humiliate you. I didn't do any of that. I'm just so weak. Boy, I should have known, I should have known true apostles are strong, they abuse people. I guess I should have known how true apostles act, they exploit, they enslave, they entrap, they dominate, they humiliate. I guess I...I guess I just didn't know how an apostle should really act. I guess I'm just ashamed that I'm so weak by comparison. If greed, abuse, tyranny, exploitation, manipulation and humiliation are the marks of a true apostle, then I'm a failure...I'm a fake."

I think they got the message. Then he says in conclusion in verse 21, "But in whatever respect anyone else is bold," he means the false apostles, "to whatever degree they've been bold," again another disclaimer, "I speak in foolishness. I am just as bold myself." I hate it, I don't want to do it. It is foolish because you're foolish. You think you're so smart and you're so foolish that you forced me to this folly and I'm going to do it, I have to do it. They were bold and I'm going to be bold. They were confident and I'm going to be confident.

He will write unhesitatingly, confidently in the hope that the Corinthians will once and for all and finally see the truth and turn from the destructive bullies to the true apostle and the true Word of God. He finally starts in verse 22 and we'll start with him next time.

In conclusion, just a comment or two, the key to understanding this lesson today is to understand how much Paul hated pride, how much he hated to boast even when it was about the truth. He didn't even want to say what was true about him for fear it that it might somehow bring honor to him rather than his Lord. He is frightened even to say what God has done for fear that it somehow might intrude on his commitment to humility. And he teaches us so powerfully that never is a person more humble than when they are forced to boast and can do it humbly. That's exactly what he will do. And for those who are humble, the promises of Scripture again, you will be heard by God when you pray, delivered by God when in trouble, have the privilege of enjoying the presence of God, be honored by God, live a long and prosperous life, be the object of God's special attention and personal care, be lifted up and exalted by God, be the greatest in His Kingdom, receive the grace of God, inherit the

earth and eternal glory and you will be like Christ. Join me in prayer.

Father, this is such a small little glimpse into the life of a man but such a big issue, this matter of humility. It elicited out of him the most reluctance of anything we've seen in his life. It elicited out of him the most blistering sarcasm which showed his immense disdain for pride which is exactly what totally characterized the false apostles. It invaded his desire to follow Christ in everything and it threatened his humility. Lord, he is such an example to us of being humble even when forced by the worst of situations to a self-defense. We must do it reluctantly, thoughtfully and humbly. Father, we pray that You would produce in us that humility that we see in Jesus and in Paul. And may we meet those circumstances as he did in those times when forced to that defense to do so with meekness. Thank You, Father, for this wonderful morning, may it be used mightily in our lives. We pray for the glory of our Savior. Amen.

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