

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: An Apostle's Reluctant, Yet Intentional Boasting
SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 11:16-33
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Date: February 26, 2006

Introduction: In the latter half of chapter 11 Paul continues both his defense of his ministry and his exposure of the false apostles. He will use irony, comparison, and personal example in his effort to present the true character of a leader. His desire is that the believers in the Corinthian church gain understanding regarding God's leadership values. The ultimate crescendo of his argument spills over into chapter 12, which we will investigate next week.

Two weeks ago Pastor Steve sang a song entitled "In Christ Alone." The words of the refrain state:

In Christ alone, I place my trust
 And find my glory in the power of the cross.
 In every victory let it be said of me,
 My source of strength, my source of hope is Christ alone.

I don't know if the Apostle Paul could sing, but I believe these words reflect his heart and mind. He lived with an unwavering faith in and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. He clearly understood and experienced God's grace daily. He recognized his need for and lived in continual dependence upon God's strength and provision.

Galatians 2:20 provides a good summary statement: "I have been crucified with Christ and ***I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*** The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

This is the man who writes the words that we consider today in II Corinthians 11, beginning at verse 16.

I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

In chapter 10 Paul began to directly confront the false apostles that had become active in the church in Corinth. He has developed a series of arguments to discredit them and challenge the believers in the church to rethink their acceptance of these individuals. Woven throughout what he has written is an expressed concern about the self-promotion by these individuals.

Now Paul himself states that he will boast. What has happened? Is this foolish on his part, lowering himself to the level of the false apostles? Or is it something that he does with great wisdom and intent?

Foolish...or Wise? (11:16-21a)

I clearly suggest it is the latter. I believe that is apparent as we identify his use of irony in this paragraph. Irony is a literary style that employs contrast for rhetorical effect. Irony is the use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning. It is an expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning. Irony is different from sarcasm. Sarcasm

intends to ridicule or to wound. Sarcasm is described as a “cutting remark.” Paul’s use of irony here is seen most clearly in verses 19 and 21. He does not believe that people in the church in Corinth have acted with wisdom, yet he calls them wise. And he states that he is weak, yet he means just the opposite.

I also believe that the context here both defends and confirms Paul’s motive for now choosing to boast. His desire is to lead the believers in the Corinthian church to return to a Biblical understanding of leadership character and action. It is deemed necessary to present the example of his life and ministry in contrast to that of the false apostles. In his judgment that is a foolish thing to do; yet it also is really a necessary and wise thing to do, given the situation. He is both reluctant and intentional!

Please return to verse 16. I want to read again what Paul has written, but I will do so using my own paraphrase. If I had to give a title to this section of verses, it would be “Paul’s request of a momentary indulgence.”

Please humor me for a few minutes. I know I’ve stated this before, but it is worth repeating. Don’t think that I don’t know what is going on. (Parenthetically, a fool is someone who is without understanding, someone who doesn’t “get it.” It is not the term of abuse or insult that is addressed in Matthew 5:22 with stern warnings that we are to avoid using that term.) So don’t think that I don’t know what is going on. But even if that is your opinion of me, just consider me as one who just doesn’t get it and tolerate me for a little bit. I ask you to do that because I intend to do a little boasting myself. Granted, you would never find Christ promoting Himself in this way, but I certainly am not speaking as He would in this situation.

The bottom line is that because so many others who present themselves for leadership in the church are boasting (Don’t you realize that this is the world’s way of doing things; self-promotion, self-exultation.), I have chosen to do so as well. And after all, you’ll put up with me because that is what you have done with other fools. You really have it so together so it should not be any problem to tolerate what I have to say. In fact, your tolerance is legendary, including the acceptance of even those who would abuse you, spiritually! Kudos to you!! But sad to say, I confess that I am just not strong enough to do that.

From that interesting prelude or introduction, Paul now presents his résumé. This is his “boast.” What follows is an abbreviated summary of his work history as an apostle. Granted, this will be given in broad brush strokes. We don’t encounter an expanded example until verse 30. Let’s observe the progression through which Paul leads us.

Examining Résumés (11:21b-29)

As we read, bear in mind that Paul desires here to establish an intentional comparison of his résumé or credentials with that of the false apostles that have come into the church in Corinth. That is particularly noticed in verses 22 and 23. I will begin reading in the middle of verse 21.

What anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more.

Even as he begins this comparison, Paul voices his ongoing hesitancy to engage in such self-focus! That acknowledged, it is clear that Paul is making a comparison.

He does so first in the area of lineage in verse 22. There is the possibility that the false apostles had touted their Jewish lineage as something superior to Paul’s. If they had actually grown up and lived in Jerusalem or the area of Judea, they could have viewed that as somehow a better lineage than Paul who grew up in

Antioch. Paul's contention is that his lineage is equal to theirs. He presents a similar case in Philippians 3 where he states *If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews...*

Next Paul uses another area of comparison, that of being servants of Christ. Rather than declaring equality, Paul states that he is more a servant of Christ than the false apostles. He doesn't belabor the point. Yet you cannot escape the clear message of those three words at the end of verse 23, *I am more.*

Everything that follows, from the middle of verse 23 through the end of verse 29, builds from and expands on those three words. Here are the credentials that Paul offers as an indication of his service for Christ. Reading through this list does not begin to do justice to all that these words represent. As you look at and listen to what Paul writes, bear in mind that these are the experiences of one individual, scattered over about 20 years.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

In 1984 and 1985 Clara Peller became a noted spokeswoman for a fast food restaurant chain. Anyone remember Clara? She was in her 80s, and she stood 4 feet and 11 inches tall. Her famous line, consisting of three words, was "Where's the beef?"

That's a question that Paul could have asked the false apostles: "Where's the beef?" In other words, what are their credentials? Where is the substance behind their claim to ministry position in the church in Corinth? Paul details his experience and his mindset as a basis for comparison with the false apostles. One of my immediate responses is that there simply is no comparison between his credentials of service for Christ and that of the false apostles! Paul's list is simply overwhelming!

We don't have the time today to develop every detail that is presented in these verses. Some of these experiences are recorded in the book of Acts. For those we could read the account and get a fuller picture. Quite a bit of what Paul mentions here are more overall themes that run through the gamut of his ministry.

What I will do today is first suggest six words or phrases that serve as "handles." I use them to summarize this listing of credentials for Paul's apostleship. These are both on the printed outline and the screens. I will confine myself to brief comments about most of them.

Intensity: That word summarizes what is presented in the second half of verse 23. I draw that from the use of the words "much," "more," and "again and again." Paul does not deny that others have or may have had similar experiences. However, the intensity and frequency of his experience is greater.

Repetition: In verses 24 and 25 it appears that Paul is giving additional detail to some of the statements written in verse 23. The severe floggings and repeated exposure to death could well be associated with the repetitive experiences listed in verses 24 and 25.

Transitory: How would you like the first seven words of verse 26 to be the summary of your life? Paul states that he has been constantly on the move. The words literally are “frequent walkings” or “frequent journeys.”

In the first church in which I served I met a husband and wife that had lived in 40 homes over 40 years of marriage! He was a remodel carpenter. He would purchase a home. They would move into the home and he would proceed to remodel it. When finished they would sell that home and move again. And the process would be repeated! Paul’s statement, however, is in the context of ministry, not remodeling.

Constant danger: Eight times in verse 26 you will find the word “danger.” The word conveys the sentiment of being in danger or at risk. The majority of the danger that is referenced here comes from people! Interestingly, those that are listed last are “false brothers.” The Life Application Bible Commentary on this verse considers this placement strategic. Their conclusion reads *...his point is abundantly clear. Since he had bravely faced all sorts of dangers for Christ, he certainly would have enough courage to face those false teachers who were discrediting his authority and his name in Corinth.*

Extreme sacrifice: These words express what Paul recounts in verse 27. Whatever experiences Paul has in mind, he twice inserts the word “often.” His known practice was to often work for his own living at the same time he was investing in planting churches. That could account for some of what is noted here. But the level of deprivation suggested here certainly exceeds that.

Deep concern: As we come to verses 28 and 29 the focus now shifts from that which is primarily external to internal. It is Paul himself that makes that distinction by literally having written “apart from the things that are without...” We can be certain that there was a lot going on in Paul’s heart and mind while all the experiences listed to this point transpired. Regardless of what that was, there is the additional concern that Paul always carried with him for the churches he had planted and the individuals within those churches.

If we will pause, even momentarily, and reflect on this list, I believe again that we will acknowledge that it is simply overwhelming. It becomes more so when we step back into these verses for an expanded look.

Let’s return to verse 24; *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.*

Here is what J. Phillip Arthur writes about this experience. *‘Forty stripes’ was a Jewish punishment meted out to those who fell foul of the discipline of the synagogue. Teachers who departed from the faith were among those who were liable to it. A whip of three cords was used. Two thirds of the blows fell on the offender’s back, the other third on his chest. The victim would be left raw and bleeding, looking more like a side of beef than a man. There was always the possibility that the offender might die under the lash, which was why one stroke less was given just to avoid the possibility of the officer in charge losing count and doling out too many. Most people would be so traumatized after one such beating that they would be extremely reluctant to face another. That, of course, was the point of the exercise. The whole purpose of the punishment was to terrify the victim into submission. The fact that he endured it five times suggests not only that Paul had a strong constitution, but also that God strengthened him with an extraordinary sense of resolve.*

If you have your Bible open, put your finger here in II Corinthians 11 and turn back to chapter 4. If you don’t have your Bible open I would invite you to do so at this point. If you want to take one of the Bibles in the hymn rack, please do so. I believe it is quite important that we see these words. I’ve chosen to not put the verses I’m going to read on the screen. I think it best if you see them in your own Bible, and perhaps write a margin note to refer ahead to II Corinthians 11.

II Corinthians 4:16-18. *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

...our *light and momentary troubles*... That is the perspective of the same individual who, in chapter 11, details his life in ministry. Wow! Where would we say is the primary focus in our life? Is it on the internal, or the external? Is it on the temporary, or the eternal? I fear we will dismiss Paul's experiences recorded in chapter 11 as irrelevant to us. We have not experienced even a minute fraction of what he did. Regardless of that reality, our need to fix our eyes on the eternal is just as important as it was for Paul.

Please return to II Corinthians 11. Let's think further about those seven words at the beginning of verse 26. They reveal a rootlessness that was a part of Paul's life. That is not at all unlike Christ's words in response to the individual that told Christ they would follow Him wherever He went. Jesus replied, *Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.* Matthew 8:20. What are the foundations upon which we are building our life? It certainly is nice to live in the same community and even in the same house for many years. But we should never rely on that for our roots! Colossians 2:6 and 7 remind us, *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, **rooted** and built up in him...* The reminder for us today is that our roots are also in Christ!

Please let your eyes not drop down to verses 28 and 29. Paul speaks here of the daily pressure of his concern for all the churches. In some respects it could be stated that Paul was concerned about the church even before his conversion. His concern at that point was intense, and focused on bringing harm. After his conversion his focus on the church remains intense, but it has undergone a complete reorientation. The actual wording here conveys the idea of (willingly) carrying the burden of oversight. The word "pressure" in verse 28 speaks of careful and even anxious care about something or someone. It is the same word that is used in I Peter 5: 7 – *Cast all your anxiety (there's the word) on him because he cares for you.* It would be inappropriate to conclude that Paul ignored the counsel of this verse. His was not an anxious care. It was realistic and appropriate concern, as demonstrated by what he is writing to the church of Corinth. It was a care that he had and lived out for all the churches (those in Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Phillippi, Colosse, and Galatia). It extended to the individuals within the church and their struggles in following Christ. What a profound, albeit brief glimpse into the heart of a spiritual shepherd.

There are four remaining verses in the passage yet to address. Let's briefly look at them before we move toward some concluding applications.

An Acceptable Reason for Boasting (11:30-33)

In verses 30 and 31 we learn more about the heart of Paul as he states, *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.* These words convey at least three thoughts. First, I believe it gives perspective on the listing of experiences that Paul has just given. In his selection of things about which he will boast, he has listed areas that you'd never see in the résumé of a false apostle. In fact, it is likely that we will never see such items in any résumé. These are failures and weaknesses. Even in his boasting, Paul is declaring his dependence.

Second, he defends his integrity. He has chosen to boast and compare. But he has not exaggerated or embellished anything. He has been entirely truthful. Even as he has done so, he is embarrassed if attention goes to anyone except God!

Third, this statement begins a transition to what Paul will address in chapter 12. The crescendo of Paul's thinking in the first half of that chapter will culminate with his conclusion in verse 10: *For when I am weak, then I am strong*. His weaknesses and failures, at least from a human point of view, are the ideal conditions in which God can display His strength.

To emphasize his point he gives a personal illustration in verses 32 and 33. *In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.*

I believe the point Paul seeks to make is his willingness to trade personal grandeur for God's glory. Philip Hughes, in his Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians states it this way. *In the first place, we may take it that this escape from Damascus held particular significance for the Apostle; it was the initiation of the new recruit into the front line of gospel warfare. But, secondly, it was an event which emphasized, at the very beginning of his ministry, his abject weakness and frailty: Paul the Apostle who was ignominiously lowered in a fish-basket at dead of night in order to escape the Jewish enemies of the gospel was none other than the man who as Saul of Tarsus, the arrogant Jewish persecutor and blasphemer of Christ, had ostentatiously approached this same city of Damascus with authority from the high-priest to arrest and manhandle Christ's followers. The contrast between Saul of Tarsus and Paul the Apostle could not have been more striking, nor the contrast between his manner of approach to Damascus and his manner of exit from it. And, thirdly, may it not with good reason be inferred that Paul intended, by mention of this experience here rather than within the framework of the earlier catalogue, to present it as an effective and contrasting prelude to the experience which he is now about to describe (12:2ff.)? The man who experienced the ineffable "ascent" even to the third heaven was the same man who had experienced the undistinguished "descent" from a window in the Damascus wall. Paul is determined to keep himself in true perspective, which is that of a weak and unworthy mortal who owes everything to the grace of Almighty God.*

Well, we must conclude. I acknowledge that on more than one occasion as I read and studied in this passage I found myself protesting. My life experience is so different from that of Paul's I struggled with relevance. As I continued to reflect, however, a number of points of relevance began to unfold. Some of them have already been presented, in context, during the message. I would add to those the following:

Personal Applications

First, we must be careful to imply motive; but we also must not use motive to excuse inappropriate action. Throughout the passage that we have examined today and even into the broader context Paul has stated, clarified, and even defended his motive for participation in this boasting. He is quite thorough in explaining why. In reflection on that I am reminded of two things. One, we err when we assume we know the motive of another. We need to use caution in implying or concluding another's motive. Yes, Paul boasts. In fact, he acknowledges that himself. Understanding his motive is necessary to make a proper evaluation of his action. The other side of this issue is that we can use motive as an excuse for inappropriate action. An example would be cheating on a college entrance examine. Our motive of wanting a college education at a particular institution does not justify cheating. Another example would be dating an unbeliever, under the stated guise of being a witness. That is using a defensible motive (wanting someone to come to faith in Christ) as an excuse for doing that which is dangerous if not sinful. Our goal should be both integrity of motive, and Biblical actions.

Second, Paul's "boasting" provides opportunity to examine our service and obedience to Christ. I've already stated that my life experience is very different from that of Paul's. I would believe that is true of all of us. Yet a reflection on his life does allow me to think about certain aspects of my relationship with Christ. How committed and obedient am I to Christ in my daily life? Is my commitment conditional or unconditional,

strongly influenced by circumstances or unaffected by circumstances? Do I cultivate a relationship with Christ that willingly states I will follow Christ, anytime and anywhere? Do I care about others? It cost Paul to care for the church and individuals within the church. The Scriptures challenge us to bear one another's burdens. Do we do that? Are we willing to pay that cost? Asking these questions may serve to remind us that we can't do any of this apart from God's strength and grace! There is value in making the comparison.

(If time allows, I want to remind us today that when we are faithful in our service to God, He is faithful to bring encouragement and affirmation to us. In January I received a letter from Jad Ghrrayeb. His ministry involves frequent mailings of Bibles and Christian material throughout the world. Here is his story.

“On one of these days, as I was very tired and struggling with the new load of 42 boxes that I was taking into the post office, I turned to my friend who was helping me, and I asked ‘Who will read all this material?’ I then left him in the line and went over to our post office box to pick up the ministry mail. There, I found a letter from a Moroccan man sharing a part of his testimony and life with us. I would like to share this with you.”

...I was living in the trash, this was my life. I would spend my days collecting anything good that I could find to sell for food, drugs and cigarettes. I was always unhappy and always worrying about how I would survive the next day. One day, I pulled a book from the trash and I started to read it. This book turned out to be the New Testament (your name and address were printed on the last page). I found it to be very interesting, and at the same time, I wondered about the beautiful way it was written. I asked a man walking by if there was anyone I could talk to about this book, and he told me about a Christian man that he knew. I immediately went to find this man and speak with him. I listened to him talk for many hours about Jesus. Finally, I gave my heart to the Lord! As I think about this, it seems that I only pulled that New Testament out of the trash, but actually, that New Testament pulled my life out of the trash – the trash of the world and of sin and darkness...

Finally, the Biblical path to greatness has always been through serving. That was Jesus' own statement as recorded in Matthew 18:26-28. *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* These words are reinforced by what He states in John 13:13-15. *Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

Floyd McClung, in the reader for the Perspectives Course, gives this final summation. *Too many people want the fruit of Paul's ministry without paying the price that Paul paid. He died. He died to everything. He died daily. He was crucified with Christ. This strong-willed, opinionated man knew that he must die to self. He knew that in his flesh, he couldn't generate the revelation of Jesus; he couldn't sustain the heart of Christ. So he died. He abandoned his life. He abandoned himself.*