

“Foolish Boasting,” 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 (Seventh Sunday After Pentecost, July 28, 2019)

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

PRAY

A sermon on this passage requires more of an introduction than most. Paul, the author of 2 Corinthians, talks about boasting, he speaks of “talking like a madman,” he writes of “things that show my weakness.” What in the world is he talking about? We have know some context to find out.

Paul, remember, was an apostle of Jesus Christ, commissioned directly by him to take the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection all over the Roman world. The way Paul did that was by gathering the Christians in every city into churches, setting pastors and elders over them, so the Scriptures could be explained and the people reminded of the good news over and over again each Lord’s Day and they could be built up in the faith. One of those cities where Paul started a church was Corinth. He started this church sometime around A.D. 45.

Paul did in Corinth what he usually did and quickly many in Corinth became followers of Jesus. Paul remained with the church there for at least two years, teaching and preaching and building up the fellowship, before he moved on.

But then after Paul left the church in Corinth, the entire city was caught up in a new craze. In fact, this new craze swept the entire Roman world. Charismatic public speakers became all the rage. Public speaking has always been valued but in the first century it became the premier form of entertainment. It was like the British Invasion of 1964, when the Beatles went on *Ed Sullivan*. Young women screaming and fainting and people mobbing them for their autographs. These men became megastars because of their ability to speak so as to persuade and enthrall.

People paid big money to hear them, and it didn't take long for these speakers to find their way into the church at Corinth. Word of this gets back to Paul, and he writes to rebuke the church for going after them. In 11:5 Paul sarcastically refers to these speakers as the "super-apostles," and he is sure they are having a destructive influence on the church in Corinth.

This morning I want to examine Paul's rebuke of the church at Corinth for following after these super-apostles so that we can learn for ourselves three characteristics of true spiritual authority.

This is important for all of us to know. If you're a Christian, you're either going to be a spiritual authority to someone else (as a pastor, an elder, a parent, a Bible study leader, a Sunday school teacher, a community group host) or you will be under the spiritual authority of someone else. Many of us will be both spiritual authorities and under the spiritual authority of others. We need to know how to exercise spiritual authority and what to run away from as fast as we can.

And if you're here this morning and not a Christian or if you're skeptical of the church in general, you need to hear this. I'd say far more than half the objections to Christianity in the U.S. are due to failures of people in spiritual authority. Perhaps you've seen one of our culture's "super-apostles" stumble. Or perhaps you've suffered because someone abused their spiritual authority over you. If that's happened to you, I just want to acknowledge that as a pastor I know full-well that sort of thing happens, it happens far too often, and I'm sorry. There's no excuse. But please make sure you don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Just because you've seen horrible examples of spiritual authority doesn't mean that spiritual authority in and of itself is bad, just like horrible parents are not proof that having children is in and of itself bad.

Three characteristics of true, biblical, and healthy spiritual authority: first, when it comes to spiritual authority, outward appearances don't matter. Second, true spiritual authority doesn't take advantage of people. Third, true spiritual authority boasts in weakness.

First, outward appearances don't matter. These super-apostles who invaded the Corinthian church emphasized style over substance. **What mattered more than what you said was how you said it.** They were trained in a kind of rhetoric that was pleasing to hear, but because the focus was so much on style that the content got completely overwhelmed. In 11:13 Paul calls them "false apostles" and "deceitful workmen" not so much because of what they taught. It may very well be that the content of their messages was faithful to the Scriptures, but medium of their rhetoric and style drowned out the gospel message.

Paul refused to do this. He knew that emphasizing style over substance is destructive to the church. It's not that Paul couldn't speak this way; he was a brilliant man, I'm sure he could. But he knew this kind of speaking, easy as it might be to listen to, will not build up the body of

Christ. So Paul says in 11:6, “Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.”

I do a lot of public speaking and I know I could go each week and find tear-jerking stories, or stories that get you worked up and angry, or funny illustrations that get you laughing, and by building my sermons around them it would help me gain a reputation as a good preacher. There’s nothing wrong with using stories in a sermon *unless they have nothing to do with the passage of the Bible we’re supposed to study that week, or unless the illustration is so powerful that all you remember is the great story the preacher told but totally forget the biblical principle it’s supposed to illustrate.* That kind of teaching is all about appearances, and it’s out of place when used by those in spiritual authority.

But with the super-apostles, what was even more important than your skill in public speaking **was how you looked while you did it.** In 10:10 we read how the people in Corinth began to criticize Paul. “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.’”

In his celebrity speaking culture sweeping the Roman empire, you had to look the part. They wore the most fashionable clothes. They went to the gym and lifted weights. They even applied plaster to their chest, arms, and legs to rip all the hair out so their bodies would look exactly like all the statues of the Greek gods. We actually have accounts of people complaining about the screams coming from the baths as they did this. There truly is nothing new under the sun.

Paul, on the other hand, was not physically impressive at all. Maybe it was something wrong with his eyes, or his nose, or a deformity in his spine. He certainly wasn’t tall and may have been unusually short. He didn’t look like one of the Greek gods. This explains why the people in Corinth liked his letters but didn’t want him to come back and be the minister of their church.

We tend to make the same mistake. When we start looking for ministers, we tend to say things like, “He’s so sharp, he’s so good in front of people, he makes such a good first impression.” All too rarely do we ask questions that get to the heart. All too rarely do we ask, “Does he pray? Does he repent? Does he love to be with his wife? Do his children love to be with him? Is he confrontable?”

When we look for a Bible study to be a part of, we tend to want to know if it’s go-getters in the community who attend it, the plugged-in, the influential, and if so we’re more likely to sign up for it. All too rarely do we wonder, “Are they desperate to know the Word of God in this Bible study? And if they do know it, are they ready to do whatever it takes to obey it?”

There’s nothing wrong with being physically attractive or popular. If you are, it doesn’t rule you out of being a spiritual authority. And let me go on the record as being in favor of tall men as pastors. There’s nothing wrong with being tall. *But there’s nothing right about it either. It just flat doesn’t matter.* The Lord Jesus was not a man who got his spiritual authority from his appearance. As the prophet Isaiah says, “[H]e had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.” Isaiah 53:2b. And as God told the prophet Samuel when he was dazzled by one of Jesse’s tall, handsome sons, but not the one God had

actually chosen to be king of Israel, a boy named David, “For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7b.

A second characteristic of biblical, spiritual authority is it doesn't take advantage of people.

“¹⁹For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!” 2 Corinthians 11:19-21.

The super-apostles entered the church in Corinth under the pretense of serving them by skillfully teaching them the Word. But, in fact, the super-apostles wanted the church in Corinth to serve them. They were after their money. And more than that, they expected the people in the church to participate in their cult of personality. They wanted the church to help promote their brand so they could move around the province of Achaia and make even more money. They were trying to create followers out of the church at Corinth who could line their pocket and boost their name.

Paul refused to have anything to do with that by, first, refusing to be paid. In 2 Corinthians 11:7-9 he writes: “[D]id I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God’s gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need.”

Not only did Paul refuse to take their money but, second, Paul also refused to allow the church at Corinth to follow him. You’ll miss this if you don’t read the New Testament carefully. Not once does Paul ever refer to himself as a leader, nor does he ever tell anyone in any of the churches he started to follow him.

Christians with spiritual authority are not leaders. They don’t have followers. We only have one leader as Christians. You know who that is? Jesus. He is the one who said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34b.

Paul never says, “Follow me.” Instead he says “imitate me” or “follow my example.” That’s an important distinction. The people in Corinth might see how Paul followed Jesus and learn from imitating him, but they didn’t follow Paul because Jesus was the leader.

People with spiritual authority in the Christian church don’t lead. It is not my job as a pastor to lead you, to make decisions for you, to tell you what you should do with your life, what job to take, where to live, or who to marry. When you’re in an organization that does that, you’re in a cult, not a church. It’s not even my job to tell you how to pattern your devotional life. That’s between you and God, you and your family, they are matters of wisdom. You could come to me and ask for advice but that’s all it would be.

People with spiritual authority don’t lead; *they feed*. If you’re a Christian, you have this life inside of you, a life that is alien to the life you were born with. This life is granted unto you by God through the Holy Spirit. My job, and the job of the other elders at Grace Bible, is to feed you God’s Word, so you can grow and you can follow Jesus where he leads you, and not get

taken advantage of by super-apostles or anyone else. When you have the Spirit of God in your, you don't have to be led, only fed.

Parents, I know it's tempting to imagine your kids one day graduating with that professional degree, or getting offered an athletic scholarship to play a favorite sport at college, or to imagine them getting married and having that first grandchild. I know it's so tempting to daydream about those things. It would have to feel satisfying, and of course there's nothing wrong with any of those things. But your kids could attain one or all of those things *and still be miserable*. They could attain to one or all of those things *and not honor the Lord with their lives*.

Our job as parents is to have a single-minded focus when it comes to the spiritual authority God has given us: feed our children the Word, both personally and through the church, so that they can grow into people who follow Jesus. *That's the goal*. If your little six year old whom you love so much grows up into a forty-six year old who will follow Jesus wherever he leads, then I promise no matter where they go to school, no matter what they do for a living, no matter even whether they get married or not, ***your child is going to be just fine***. I promise Jesus is a trustworthy leader. He's the only trustworthy leader, and any deviation from that goal is taking advantage of spiritual authority.

Paul didn't take advantage of the church in Corinth. He refused to let them pay him. Now, as a pastor who does get paid by his church, I do need to point out that Paul was paid for his ministry. It's just that he took his support from Macedonia, not Corinth. It is a good thing to pay people in Christian ministry. *But it should never feel like you're being taken advantage of*, because people with spiritual authority don't take advantage.

They lead, they feed, and *they also suffer for their people*. I won't re-read verses 23-27 where Paul lists all the different trials he's faced during his ministry. Some of these events we know about from the book of Acts, but for others of them this is the only record. We know nothing else. But I do want to read 2 Corinthians 11:28-29: "And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?"

For Paul, as it is for all who faithfully exercise their spiritual authority, it's not a matter of taking advantage of the people; it's a matter of *daily anxiety* for the people.

The super-apostles didn't lose any sleep over how the people in Corinth were progressing in the faith. Paul did. Every faithful pastor, parent, Bible study leader, and small group host knows that anxiety. *We just want you to grow*. We just want you to follow Jesus. We long to see signs of it happening. And the hardest part of having this authority is waiting for it to happen and witnessing those times when these people, whom you care about so much, stumble and fall. This anxiety is diametrically opposed to taking advantage of people.

When it comes to spiritual authority, appearances don't matter, those who have it don't take advantage, and third, they boast in their weaknesses.

If in first century Corinth you were handsome, fit, and eloquent, you were on your way to making a great living as you rode the public speaking craze that was sweeping the Roman world.

But there was one thing you could have on your resume that would put you over the top. You could be a war hero. And the final stage of the siege of a city in the ancient world, ladders were put up on the city wall so the attacking Roman army could get in. The first soldier who climbed a ladder and made it over the wall would receive the equivalent to the Congressional Medal of Honor. It was called the *Corona Muralis*, or the “Wall Crown.”

If you got that, you were in. Every plum speaking opportunity, with all the attendant money and access it gave, was yours – much like the advantage high-profile politicians, athletes, coaches, and actors have today. If you’re one of them big organizations and even churches want you to come speak to them.

You may not have realized it at first but what Paul is actually doing in our passage for today is giving the Corinthians his resume. But it’s an upside-down resume. He puts stuff on it that no one in his right mind would. That’s why he says, “I am talking like a madman.”

He begins his resume by reminding them of his Jewish credentials, just in case some Jews in the church might accuse Paul of not knowing the Hebrew Scriptures well enough. Then he goes through his litany of sufferings, which is odd to put on your resume.

But he caps off his resume with verses 30-32: “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.”

Do you see what Paul is doing? He’s telling the Corinthians, “You think what qualifies someone to be your spiritual authority is their strength and courage – being the first over the wall. But I’m telling you that I was the first over the wall – going the wrong way. I wasn’t courageously trying to take the city. I was running away.” Just think how pathetic Paul would have looked, crammed into a basket, peaking out of the top, running from danger, not toward it.

Why does Paul crown his resume with that story? *Because he knows that in Christianity bragging about your strength never helped anybody.* Nobody was helped because you told a story about what a good mom you are, or what a good friend you are, or what a good student you are, or what a faithful follower of Jesus you are.

We aren’t helped when others boasting about their strengths; in Christianity, we’re helped when people are frank about their weaknesses. Years ago when I first got into the ministry I heard an interview of an older minister. He was then about eighty years old; now he’s nearing one hundred, and still preaching.

This man is known throughout the world for his preaching. He’s helped thousands if not millions of people. When it comes to putting together a sermon, he could boast about a lot. But

at one point the interviewer asked him, “I heard once that you don’t keep the notes from your sermons after you preach, do you?” “No, I don’t. I throw them all away. I can’t bear to look at them. When I look at them I can’t imagine why I had the nerve to preach it in the first place.”

I listened to that interview and thought, “Here’s a man known the world over for his skill, yet he feels weak. I can’t relate to the skill, but I can relate to the weakness.” I thought, “He feels terrible after preaching like I so often do. But if God can use him, as clearly he has, maybe God can use me too.” It was incredibly encouraging.

Why is it that we are helped in Christianity when people are frank about their weaknesses? ***It’s because when we are weak, then Jesus has room to work.*** As long as you think you’re strong in some certain area of your life, whether it’s preaching, or parenting, or working, or school, or being a good friend, who needs Jesus? Who needs his grace? Who needs his mercy? And then, in turn, if you don’t need his grace and mercy, why should you ever extend it to others? If they can’t keep up with you and your skill, that’s their problem. Just shove the losers aside and move on. Don’t waste your time with them.

But when you know you are weak – I don’t mean poor-mouthing, I don’t mean false humility, but when you feel and feel acutely how weak you are – then Jesus can come into your life and do something wonderful, because then you are forced to rely on him. Lord willing we’ll elaborate on this next week, in 2 Corinthians 12:9, where Jesus says to Paul, “‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore [Paul says] I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

And certainly the only way Jesus could save us was through his weakness, not his strength. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, we read in the gospel of Mark: “[T]hose who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, ³⁰ save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ ³¹ So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself.’” Mark 15:29-31.

Here’s the question: could Jesus have saved himself? Absolutely. It wasn’t nails holding Jesus to that cross. No nails could keep him there. He could have come down any time he chose. But you know what did keep Jesus on the cross? Love. His love for you and me kept him there so he could be the atoning sacrifice for our sins, bearing the wrath of God on sin we deserve. In the greatest act of love in human history, Jesus looked down on the cross at the people mocking, jeering, and spitting at him, and he stayed.

Could Jesus have saved himself? Absolutely. *But he couldn’t save himself and save you.* If Jesus stayed strong, we would have no hope. But Jesus became weak, so we are saved.

Friends, that’s what true spiritual authority looks like. Let’s pray right now that all of us would model and seek this kind of authority in our lives for the glory of God and the good of people around us. AMEN