

Boasting in the Lord (11:16-33)

We continue to see Paul's polemics against the false apostles. Having told the Corinthian Christians about the work of Christ and the Spirit, Paul turned from chapter 10 to expose the falsehood of these workers. In the Corinthian church there were the super apostles who boasted of their powers and achievement. Many in the church could see only the outward appearances. Of course, one can give an appearance of having achieved by changing the goal post or talking things up. In other words, we can change the standard from Christ to some other world principle to make us look good. Paul knew that the super apostles presented themselves in a way that showed to the people only what they could see and instructed them on what they ought to do. They were not able to see beyond their actions and the results that brought to the state of the human heart which only the Spirit of God can change. That is beyond what we can do. We can alter human actions by legislation or enforcement. However, when those enforcement are removed, they will go back to their old ways. This is an area where we are totally dependent on the power of God which is in the cross of Jesus Christ. So, Paul using the framework of the super apostles, sarcastically presented himself as foolishness on their terms just as he did in 1 Corinthians.

Paul had already said that in 1 Corinthians. He wrote, 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:18). He also asked, 'Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?' (1 Cor. 1:20). He further made the point,

²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

So, Paul continued in 2 Corinthians to play on that seeming contradiction of wise and foolish, strong and weak. Paul identified the boasting of his competitors as 'according to the flesh' (11:18). This is the boasting of what had been accomplished by their own efforts. Paul had done a little of that too, but with the false apostles, that was all that they do. In saying that Paul was alluding to the boasting of what the Lord has done. He elaborated on this later on. The other problem of the accomplishment 'according to the flesh' is enslavement. This is because there is not anything beyond what the super or false apostles taught. They just had to do according to the instructions given to them and that is enslavement, 'makes slaves of you' (11:20). It is the Spirit in us that gives us freedom to respond to God. Yet the Corinthian Christians were following these false apostles. They could not see through their deceit. They were taken advantage of and as it were being struck in the face (11:20).

However, before he launched into further argument, Paul wanted to state first of all his credentials, his lofty heritage as a Jew (11:21-29).

²¹ ... 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.

In writing to the Philippians, Paul emphatically said,

'... I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee (Phil. 3:4-5).

Now, having established his privileged status in life, he wanted to inform them that that was not what he had adhered to previously in life. Instead, he had taken the path of the cross that Jesus had carried. He had identified himself with Christ and His cross as Jesus had said, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). Paul was acutely aware that he was participating in the ministry of Christ and that ministry must follow the principle of the cross. That is what is meant to be a servant of Christ. Paul claimed that he was a better one because he worked harder and suffered more. The super apostles were not 'servants of Christ' (11:23). Paul had earlier mentioned Satan's deceit by the angels of light and the servants of righteousness. He then went on to list the sufferings he had gone through because of the gospel.

²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—
with far greater labors,
far more imprisonments,

Paul's imprisonment (v. 23) took place at Philippi (Acts 16:11-40), Caesarea (Act 24:1-27), and Rome (Rom. 16:7).

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.

Paul was beaten in Philippi (Act 16:19-24). There must also be other places where this took place as he told us in 1 Corinthians.

Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;

He was shipwrecked on his way to Rome (Acts 28:11).

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?

He had cop it from everybody including his own people (11:26), and false 'brothers and sisters', presumably those who were brothers and sisters in the Lord. We can identify with the 'sleepless night' (11:27) when things weigh heavily on our minds. There was also the 'anxiety for all the churches' (11:28). That is not an absence of trust in the Lord, but an expression of our concern.

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.

The incident mentioned in 11:33 happened when Paul was preaching at Damascus, shortly after his conversion.

²³ After some time had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:23-25)

There is a paper from the New Creation Ministry School in 2010 that touched on the subject of this chapter, 'Pastors of the Cross' (I Pennicook).

While others may boast of their ability and successes, let us together with Paul boast of our weakness which is a reflection of our dependence on God.

The Pauline Paradox (12:1-10)

In this passage we have the classic paradox of Paul, 'for whenever I am weak, then I am strong' (12:10). So far, Paul had been addressing the problem of the super-apostles at Corinth. These super-apostles had been claiming that they had the power to accomplish things. Perhaps they had the charisma to impress their audiences. Paul did not feel himself inferior to all that. It is not that Paul thought that he had superior power

to theirs. His confidence was in the power of the cross, the power of the Spirit in accomplishing the will of God.

Though Paul boasted a little, yet he was aware that there was nothing to be gained by doing that. This is because he knew full well that it is not the human effort that counts, but the work of the Lord in human hearts.

Paul related an event in the third person. We think that the person he referred to is himself. He had learnt to be humble and not to speak like the super apostles. In making this statement, Paul learnt it after having been given a vision of the heavens. It would be hard to restrain a person from speaking about it after that. However, Paul had to be restrained and for that he was given 'a thorn in the flesh' (12:7). What this thorn was he did not elaborate. He had to be restrained and that thorn was given for his good. In order for him to understand this, he was told by the Lord, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (12:9). What is the rationale of this?

To understand this, we need to get to the core of our theology. We are created for a life of dependence on the creator. We are meant to live a life in union with our maker. Our strength comes from God, our creator, who has invested us with all things for godly living. He is Father and that implies our dependence on Him and we live in a family of God's children.

There is also the problem with those of us to whom the Lord has revealed some very precious things. It is only natural for us to be enthused by these things and seek to share them. This may be so, but there can be instances when this is not proper as is with the case of Paul here. Why? This is because such revelations are from the Lord and He has to deal with each of us in His own way. What was meant for Paul might not be for all Jews or Gentiles. Certainly, speaking of such an experience will allow us to outflank our opponents. We may need to be restrained with the things of God. Others can only come into the precious things of God through their relationship with God. Otherwise, it will only be hearsay. We have been so used to a 'third person' relationship that we think that that is the way things ought to be. No, it is not. It is an 'I-thou' relationship – a one to one relationship with God and with each other (see below). Teaching is a necessary part but it is not a substitute for our relationship with God. Teaching is not an end in itself. It is a means to direct us to the Father.

The primary tool for our ministry is the word, the word preached, so that the hearers will receive the Word, Jesus Christ. Our ministry is not all the ancillary services that we provide in the church though they may be necessary to express the love we have for one another. It is in the foolishness of preaching that we demonstrate the truth of the wisdom of God in bringing humanity to Himself.

The 'You' of Ministry (12:11-18)

In preparation for his third visit, he wanted to bring to a conclusion all that he has written. He wanted to put in the final touches before he went to Corinth. As such it contains the essentials of ministry – the 'you' of ministry and the cross of Jesus.

This section brings to an end the dialogue on foolishness and boasting. In a way, Paul was forced into this dialogue because of the behaviour of those who opposed him. Paul's ministry of the word was in direct contrast to the exhibitionism of the others. It is true that Paul's ministry was accompanied with signs and wonders (Rom. 15:18-19), though these were not primary. It is by word and deed. He had no choice but to say his piece in order to address the issue before him. And in this difficult situation, Paul thought it best not to receive any support from them, lest his position be compromised.

'Our ministry (it) is an 'I-thou' relationship – a one to one relationship with God and with each other. We need to put the 'you' back into ministry. While ministry may include reprimands or harsh words, ultimately it is for the building up of the believers (12:19). This is the gist of what Paul was writing in this last section of the letter.

So, Paul began, 'I seek not what is yours but you' (12:14). When he said, '... for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children', he was enunciating a principle, but he was also talking to them as their spiritual father. He viewed the Corinthian church as his child. Paul was not ministering for something in return. He was not even considering his support. As he wrote earlier, he did not want the support from the Corinthians, lest he be misunderstood.

⁹ 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. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. (2 Cor. 11:9)

Paul was preparing to make a third visit to the Corinthians. The first visit to Corinth was to preach the gospel and established the church. The second was the painful visit. With the third visit Paul was not wanting to get anything from them, i.e. not to receive any support from them. Rather his visit was in the interest of their welfare, i.e. their salvation as they had turned to another gospel. Paul was writing as a father to his children looking after the welfare. That is why he did not want to be a burden to them financially. Moreover, there were accusation of financial deceit on the part of Paul, and he had to point out that this was not so. Paul had already made this point when writing to them before. He said 'that there will be no collecting when I come' (1 Cor. 16:2).

Paul further completed his argument with reference to Titus. 'As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit' (2 Cor. 8:23). Titus, a co-worker with Paul, shared the same ideal and principles as Paul, and he would in no way take advantage of the Corinthians.

Our ministry must be god-like. By this I mean that God did not create because of a need within the Godhead as some would think. He creates out of love. So must our ministry be – love for God and for His creation. If we minister to satisfy our need or to make complete what is missing in us, then we will be acting from that focus which will distort the nature of our ministry which is to the world on behalf of Christ. If our ministry expects or demands something in return, then we turn it into a contractual matter. It would no longer be covenantal.