

# Covid, Corinth and the Angel of Light

Text: 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

Intro: I belong to an online group of pastors from across Canada which exists to help pastors think biblically about matters related to the Covid 19 pandemic and matters connected with this situation.

In one church there is a pastor who is dealing with angry congregants who want to be admitted without a mask and to sit wherever they want.

In another church there is an elder who wants to implement a vaccine passport for all staff and volunteers.

I believe that our passage in 2 Corinthians speaks to this matter in an oblique way. (Now that I've provoked some of you by speaking about these controversial ideas - will you set your thoughts aside and give attention to the Word of God.)

Paul has made the case that those who seek to commend themselves are not commended by the Lord. Those who boast in their own power and ability demonstrate that they are not sent by God.

In our passage today Paul will lift the mask from the face of these self-proclaimed 'super-apostles' and reveal who they really are and the danger that they pose to the Corinthian church.

We will consider how teachers of the same master masquerade in our churches today and how to recognize them.

- I. Divine Jealousy
- II. The Free Gospel
- III. Servants of the Angel of Light

## I. Divine Jealousy

Paul adopts a metaphor that would have been familiar to his audience. He speaks of the process of betrothal in his world. In the age that Paul lived in betrothal was most often arranged by the daughters father. There was often an extended period between the betrothal and the marriage, during which time, the couple was considered in a formal relationship while living separately. Only after the marriage took place would the daughter move from her father's house to the house of her husband.

Paul adopts this picture and applies it to the relationship between the Corinthians and Christ. Paul is playing the role of the father who has betrothed the Corinthians to Christ. While waiting for the final consummation of the marriage, another suitor has arrived on the scene with the design of seducing the church away from Christ.

Any father would be prepared to defend his daughter against a seducer who threatened her future happiness, and that is how Paul feels towards these 'super-apostles'.

Paul now shifts to a different metaphor by speaking about the serpent and Eve. The emphasis is the same. The serpent came to Eve present falsehood as truths and seeking to deceive Eve - something he was successful in.

Jealousy is often a word that is used of a sinful attitude. But jealousy by definition is not necessarily sinful. If a husband or wife is jealous of the affection that rightly belongs only to them being shared with another, that is the proper way to understand jealousy. When God refers to himself as a jealous God he is referring to worship. He is unwilling to tolerate his people giving worship, which belongs to him alone, to any other god or idol. In the same way that you would be justified in being unwilling for your spouse to be intimate with anyone but yourself - intimacy belongs only to the spouse. Worship belongs only to God.

Paul is not jealous for something that is not his right to be jealous of. He has no issue when another worker, pastor, teacher or one of the apostles comes to a church he has established to teach and instruct the believers. But these 'super-apostles' are not preaching the gospel, they are preaching ANOTHER JESUS, ANOTHER SPIRIT, ANOTHER GOSPEL.

They were not so bold as to come in and SAY that they were going to present a different gospel. Rather they wormed their way in by criticizing Paul's methods and appearance and presenting themselves as superior.

When the Corinthians begin to warm to their advances they begin to present a message that is fundamentally different than the gospel that Paul had presented. They come as a seducer to draw the church away from Christ.

Paul never comes out and declares what their message was - but the hints we have indicate that their were likely elements of TRIUMPHAL CHRISTIAN LIVING in their message - presenting the Christian life as a way to

material prosperity; it seems they were also presenting some form of Jewish law-keeping as part of the process to being acceptable to God.

PAUL WILLINGLY CONCEDES that he is not as accomplished in RHETORICAL SPEAKING as these interlopers, but he declares: **Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. 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. 2 Corinthians 11:5-6**

This returns again to the theme of that which is seen and that which is unseen. The Corinthians are overly enamoured with externals and have failed to recognize that in spite of Paul's lack of eloquence, his knowledge is in no way inferior to what these men know.

C.H. Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, was once criticized by another minister for his method of preaching. This other minister had been trained in seminary to preach in a dignified way; Spurgeon on the other hand, was a passionate preacher who was popular amongst the lower classes for preaching with simplicity. Upon hearing the criticism that he wasn't a very good preacher, Spurgeon's reply was: *"Others may preach the gospel better than I can, but I rejoice that none can preach a better gospel."*

## II. The Free Gospel

Should pastors be paid for their service in teaching and preaching? Should missionaries be financially supported for taking the gospel to the unreached? Should church

planters be supported as they work to establish a new church?

The clear and simple teaching of scripture says yes.

In his earlier letter Paul wrote:

**1 Corinthians 9:4-7, 11, 14**

**Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?**

**...If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (v.11)**

**...In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. (v.14)**

Paul agrees that the Christian worker, the pastor, teacher, missionary and church planter should be financially supported in this labour. It is not wrong to expect this.

So why does Paul refuse to receive support from the Corinthians?

This was a great affront to the proud Corinthians who were embarrassed to own that their apostle could be found in the market-place on certain days making and

selling tents alongside other vendors. These new super-apostles were quite willing to take the patronage offered and to live luxuriously. It was far easier to boast about such teachers in GOOD SOCIETY.

There are likely two reasons why Paul has refused support.

FIRST and most importantly, because he does not wish to confuse his audience regarding the gospel.

The gospel is to be proclaimed freely. It is offered without charge and without condition to all. But if Paul asks a fee for preaching the gospel it is possible that some will think that the gospel is offered to those who pay to hear it preached. So it is Paul's practice NOT to receive payment from the churches he is planting while he is present with them.

This was not only true in Corinth, but also in Macedonia and Asia Minor.

**For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 1 Thessalonians 2:9**

**...nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. 2 Thessalonians 3:8**

At times Paul relied on his ability to toil with his own hands in order to cover his expenses. But more often he received gifts from other churches. More than once he

was supplied by the churches of Macedonia, either Philippi or Thessalonica to cover his expenses.

The conclusion we ought to draw from this is that those who are in a missionary setting or a church planting setting ought to be supported, not by the people they are striving to reach with the gospel, but by the established churches that have sent them out.

But Corinth is an established church, why does Paul continue to refuse their support?

THE SECOND REASON has to do with the practice of PATRONAGE. In ancient Rome and Greece it was common for philosophers and teachers to seek out a patron - a wealthy person who provided funds to support them.

Patrons also sought out teachers that they could support. Why? Because it was a symbol of status to have a well-known teacher under your support. There was an understanding that the patron received honour and credit for the teaching of the one they supported. It also meant that the one supported was in certain ways beholden to the patron.

The Corinthians wanted a piece of Paul. They wanted to claim him in a particular way that Paul knew wasn't available to them. He belonged to God - not to Corinth. They were embarrassed to have an apostle who 'drove a beat up car... so to speak. So these super-apostles seemed like an improvement - they were happy to take some money and be claimed by the Corinthians.

But it is love for the Corinthians that motivates Paul and love for themselves that motivates the super-apostles.

Application: There are two practical ways that I seek to apply this teaching at Walsh.

Many of you will remember that in the days when we took an offering during service it was my usual practice to tell visitors that they were under no obligation to put money in the offering because the offering was an act of worship given by those who belonged to the church. This was to ensure that no one ever felt that they had paid for the gospel or had placed any obligation on God by contributing financially.

C.H. Spurgeon instructed pastors at his training school to enter the pulpit with a letter of resignation in their back pocket. He did not intend that they should lack commitment to the congregation that they were called to, rather that they should remember that they don't serve for money, and they are accountable first to God and not to the congregation. When a pastor forgets this, they begin to avoid certain topics in order to keep their job. But if they hold their employment loosely, they will be prepared to preach the whole counsel of God.

### III. Servants of the Angel of Light

Paul now moves from a defensive position to the attack.

These so called 'super-apostles' are not apostles at all.

**And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim**

**that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. 2 Corinthians 11:12-15**

Here is a bold statement. These men who have arrived in Corinth declaring themselves to be superior servants of God, are actually servants of the devil.

Not only that, but the devil often chooses to disguise himself as an angel of light, and his servants often parade in the costume of servants of righteousness.

There are pastors in our communities who belong to Satan and are doing the work of the devil whether they acknowledge it or not.

This seems shocking at first - but consider this - the devils attention is focussed primarily upon the church and its leaders. He does not need to focus on the world, the world is already happy to exist in his thrall - so Satan spends his time seeking ways to corrupt the gospel.

What better way than to corrupt those who are entrusted with delivering the gospel.

How do we recognize a false teacher?

Not by their outward appearance.  
Not by whether they are nice or well liked.  
Not by whether they are eloquent and gifted.

The only way to recognize false teachers is by examining the message that they preach.

Paul warns that the Corinthians are in danger of being led away to another Jesus, another Spirit and another gospel.

These categories are sufficient to weigh pastors with.

Does this teacher teach the Jesus revealed in scripture? Do they teach Jesus as the eternal Son of God, incarnate in human flesh, born of a virgin, calling the world to repentance and belief, dying on the cross for the sins of the world, buried and resurrected the third day, ascended on high and coming again? Any teacher who denies any of these points is working for the 'Angel of Light' - the 'Father of Lies' - the 'Deceiver'.

There are many churches within our own county who have such pastors at the pulpit.

Does this teacher teach a different spirit? In regards to the Holy Spirit, do they teach that the Holy Spirit regenerates and renews a believer, that the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth, that the Holy Spirit gifts and equips the believer, that the Holy Spirit is a seal and earnest or deposit upon the believer? Do they display the fruit of the Holy Spirit in: LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL? Those who know nothing of this Spirit or display no evidence of being full of the Holy Spirit are the servants of the 'Angel of Light'.

Does this teacher proclaim the gospel fully in all of its offence and beauty? Do they warn sinners of judgment to come? Do they make clear that good works will never save you? Do they point to Jesus as the only hope for the world? Is the gospel at the heart of all they do? Or is the gospel down-played?

The devil, who appears as an angel of light, does not mind supporting opposing factions!

He's happy to establish a teacher in one church who spends all their time ranting against the government and declaring the necessity of human freedom, knowing that conservative minded people will flock to hear such things.

He's happy to establish a teacher in another church who spends all their time on issues of justice and social action, flying every flag and banner of every in vogue cause, knowing that liberal minded people will flock to hear such things.

In both places the devil is winning. The pews may be filled, but it is a different Jesus, a different Spirit and a different gospel that is being proclaimed.

Finally, beware of the teacher who places themselves ABOVE the scriptures and tells you that only certain parts of the Bible matter, or that certain parts are no longer relevant. Those who teach such things have removed any challenge to their self-commended doctrines.

CONCLUSION: Paul's concern for the Corinthian church is recorded for us in scripture, not just so that we might know something of the history of the church, but because this concern is a concern for every church.

Every leader and teacher must be examined, and the congregation ought to so study the word that they are well equipped to detect compromise and root it out when it occurs.

Let me walk out onto thin ice and address the presenting issue of our present day - Covid-19.

Far too many people, pastors and churches have allowed this pandemic and the various responses to it to distract them from their primary task of preaching the gospel and presenting Christ.

While not every pastor who does this is a false teacher, we may well find that we are serving the agenda of the Angel of Light who will grasp at anything to distract from what really matters.

To pastors who may listen later to this sermon - beware of letting opinions about medicine, opinions about politics and opinions about people who hold different opinions too much time in your pulpit.

To members of the congregation - ask for the gospel. Apply it to every aspect of life. Figure out how the gospel speaks to this current moment and make that your hope in these difficult times.