

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS FOR 1/24/10**  
**2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-15**  
By Kimberly Grassi

At the conclusion of 2 Cor. 10, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have been entrusted to him by God. In effect they are his territory and as an apostle commissioned by Christ Himself, Paul has a burden of responsibility for this community of believers. In chapters 11 and 12, Paul's tone becomes much more sarcastic as he protectively shows his love for the Corinthians by revealing the drastic differences between his ministry and that of the "false apostles." It is Paul's desire to deliver a faithful group of believers over to Christ at His coming, but the influence of the false teachers in Corinth is placing the Corinthian church in jeopardy of being led astray to a different gospel.

In 2 Cor. 11:1 Paul asks the Corinthians to bear with him in a little foolishness. This has led many commentators to title the section 2 Cor. 11:1-12:13 "The Fool's Speech," further dividing the section into an introduction (11:1-21a), the "Fool's Speech" proper (11:21b-12:10), and the epilogue (12:11-13).<sup>1</sup> The "Fool's Speech" is a rhetorical tool that is characterized by irony, sarcasm, mock humility, word-play, diatribe, and rhetorical comparison for the purpose of contrasting the speaker and his opponents.<sup>2</sup> It is important to keep this in the back of our minds as we read through chapters 11 and 12. Although Paul admits that he operates out of weakness, he addresses the accusations of his opponents by taking their invectives to the extreme and revealing to his readers the absurdity of the attacks. It is important to keep in mind that although the content of this speech has elements of humor, Paul is using this specific form not simply to be caustic or manipulative, but to awaken an emotional response in the hearts of his readers so that they will be ready to hear his words of love and respond to the call of Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:1-15 is divided into several sections: 11:1-4 (a general introduction in which Paul confronts the Corinthians for bearing with those who have deceived them), 11:5-6 (a comparison between Paul and the "super" apostles), 11:7-12 (Paul undercuts his opponents in defending the ministerial approach he took with the Corinthians), and 11:13-15 (Paul's stark description of the false apostles). Up to this point in the book, Paul has hinted at the influence of the false teachers, he has called them peddlers of the word, he has compared his ministry of glory that leads to life to their ministry of Moses that leads to death, and he has asserted his right to exercise authority over the Corinthians as both the founder of the church and as an apostle called by God. As we embark upon these next chapters, Paul directly confronts the character and the teaching of these teachers and calls the Corinthians to make a decision as to who they are going to follow. It is not personality or style of leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 494.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, p. 495.

that is the issue, rather it is the gospel that is at stake and Paul fights on behalf of this beloved congregation. Ben Witherington III writes, “This passage is incomprehensible unless one recognizes that while Paul is boasting, it is all clearly tongue-in-cheek. The rhetorical intent of such a move was to ridicule the claims and boasts of his opponents indirectly so that the Corinthians would see how foolish *they* had been to listen to the opponents or to let these false ones take advantage of them (11:20).”<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Corinthians 11:1-4

Paul opens this chapter with the words, “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness,” and so introduces his shift in strategy. Apparently Paul has been accused of being a fool, or being foolish, a theme that he has already taken to task in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians Paul writes that the wisdom of the world is foolishness and the cross appears to be foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 3:19, 1 Cor. 1:18-25). At issue here is the humiliation of the cross. It is not the life and ministry of the earthly Jesus that is a point of contention, but it is the weakness and the suffering of the cross that is difficult for the Corinthians (Jewish and Gentile) to comprehend. Paul has already defended his own suffering in 2 Corinthians as that which imitates the life and ministry of Christ. Now he defends the point again that if he is called weak and foolish it is only because the message of the cross is humility. Jesus did not die so that his followers could have great material and societal success in this life. He died so that they could experience the love and forgiveness of God the Father and so live this life trusting both in His present help and His future promises. Paul had learned to take his eyes off of his circumstances and trust that God was leading him, but the Corinthians were still in the process of learning to trust and learning to have their perspective transformed. So as Paul asks them to bear with them in a little foolishness, he not so subtly confronts their opinion of him. Paul asks that they would tolerate or bear with him, which are harsh words considering the deep love and affection that Paul has for the Corinthians and the love they also have for him.

In 11:2 Paul brings up two concepts: 1) the idea of jealousy and 2) the idea of betrothal. The two of these terms together underscores the idea that this group of believers has been promised to God and it is the jealous love that God has for His own people that Paul taps into as he strives to present the Corinthians to God, pure and unwavering. In the culture of the day, to be betrothed to someone was for a father to promise his daughter to a man in marriage. During this betrothal period, the father’s responsibility was to keep his daughter a virgin until she married her husband. If the daughter was found not to be a virgin, the husband could walk away from the marriage. The importance of this imagery is that Paul is acting as the father of the bride to this church. Paul sees it as his duty to keep this church pure in its understanding of who Christ is and how their relationship with Christ should be lived out in the world. With the influence of the false teachers, the Corinthians are at risk. The false teachers have sidled their way into the congregation and are attempting to seduce the Corinthian believers away from the truth. Paul is acting as a protective father because his goal is

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, p. 444.

to ultimately present to Christ a body of believers who have grown deeper in their faith and understanding, not a group of people who have fallen prey to other teachings. Paul draws both this teaching and his passion from the Old Testament image of God's marriage to the nation Israel. The whole story of the Old Testament is God wooing Israel to Himself. God wanted Israel's sole devotion so the Israelites could be blessed and be a blessing. He did not tolerate idolatrous behavior, which amounted to adultery, and the Israelites suffered the consequences of their choices.

In 11:3, Paul puts his concern plainly before the Corinthians, which is that they will "be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." This short phrase summarizes both the activity of the false teachers and the concern of Paul's heart. Resorting to imagery that goes back to the Garden of Eden, Paul emphasizes that it was the craftiness or trickery of the serpent's words that seduced and deceived Eve into doubting the words of God. These verses are powerful in that Paul's intent is to drive home the seriousness of what the Corinthians have opened themselves up to believe. It is not simply that the false teachers are better Jews or better speakers or that they accept money from the Corinthians, it is their teaching that directly challenges the truth of who Christ is and what He has come to do on our behalf. In 11:4 we read of "one who comes" likely pointing to one particular person who was the ringleader of the false teachers. Paul accused this "one" of preaching another Jesus, operating in another spirit, and promulgating a different gospel. Based on 2 Cor. 11:22-23 we know that the false teachers (being led by the one) are Jewish. From Paul's discussion in 2 Cor. 3, they are considered ministers of the old covenant, implying that they have misunderstood the Law and its fulfillment in Christ. We do not know specifically what they taught regarding Jesus, but to continue to trust in the Mosaic system was to misunderstand the saving significance of the cross. It may be that the false teachers emphasized the earthly Jesus at the expense of the exalted Christ. (Some commentators see Paul's use of the name "Jesus" as opposed to "Christ" as pointing to this). Paul also speaks of a different spirit that is touted by these false teachers. If they are preaching a Mosaic message, then they are not able to receive the Holy Spirit as He is inextricably linked to the new covenant. It is the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and His continued presence with believers that marks the "new age." Paul does not define the "different gospel" but he has been clear in the areas where his message he brings conflicts with that which the false teachers are bringing. The core of Paul's gospel message is contained in 2 Cor. 5:18-19, where he speaks of the ministry of reconciliation. God is actively working to reconcile the world to Himself through the cross. The false teachers cannot preach this message if they are focused on the works of Moses. Ultimately though, Paul points to a beginning point in time when the Corinthians *heard* of the true Jesus, they responded and *received* the true Spirit, and they *accepted* the true gospel. Paul's concluding words turn however on a sarcastic note. If this is their heritage, how can they bear the false teachers so beautifully?

## **2 Corinthians 11:5-6**

In these two short verses, Paul makes it clear that the importance of these false teachers is self-derived. Paul compares himself to what he calls "the most eminent

apostles” or “super apostles,” a term he will use again in 2 Cor. 12:11. This is likely how the Corinthians viewed these teachers and how the teachers viewed themselves. The accusation made against Paul was that he was inferior. In 11:6, we read that Paul was considered to be inferior in his speaking skills, but regardless of the accusations made against him, Paul stands his ground. He seeks to shift the perspective of his audience from the message presented to the content of the message. The Corinthians highly revered the form of the message and although Paul did not conform to the same rhetorical forms, there is no denying that he was a powerful speaker and teacher. The book of Acts is replete with examples of the power of Paul’s public teaching. The “super apostles” may have had a better grasp of these revered rhetorical skills, but as Paul has said already in 1 Cor. 13:1, “If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” It is not Paul’s desire to beautify his message, but rather to clearly communicate the content of his message and so live out the truth of Christ’s death and resurrection. Paul makes it clear that he is by no means inferior in his knowledge. This particular word for knowledge “*gnosis*” carries the meaning of personal knowledge as opposed to factual knowledge. Paul certainly had his facts straight, but what sets him apart from the super apostles is that he had a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus and he acquired his understanding of Christ through that experience and as he lived out his calling. The super apostles can make no such claim. Paul is certain that his shared knowledge has impacted the Corinthians and he forces them to make a comparison between the two competing ministries.

## **2 Corinthians 11:7-12**

In 2 Cor. 11:7-12, Paul turns his attention to another matter that he is forced to defend which is his decision to refuse to accept financial support from the Corinthians. It was the practice in Corinth for orators to accept patronage from their audiences. When an orator accepted the patronage, he would be associated with his patron exclusively. Paul eschewed this relationship and instead chose to work at the profession in which he was trained: tent making. Paul’s missionary model did not sit well with the Corinthians for two reasons: 1) they were bothered that he refused patronage and 2) they did not respect people who worked with their hands for a living. By choosing to work at a trade, Paul was associating himself with the lower classes. This became a source of contention between Paul and the Corinthians. The false teachers did accept their patronage though and so conformed to the expectations of what a Christian leader should be like.

Paul opens this section with a question, “Did I commit a sin in humbling myself by preaching to you without charge?” Paul uses exaggerated language here and in 11:8, to highlight the absurdity of their accusations against him. In what economy is it a sin to offer a service free of charge? According to the Corinthians, any teaching that was offered free of charge was considered to have no value. Paul makes it clear though that the issue was not so much the money, rather he was modeling humility so that they could be elevated. Paul could have easily accepted money from them and then he would be limited in his scope of ministry. By supporting himself by his trade, Paul could

be all things to all people and bring the gospel to everyone. Paul then goes on to echo another of his accusations that he “robbed other churches” by accepting their support when he was with the Corinthians. In 11:9 we learn that while Paul was in Corinth, he had a specific financial need. Instead of turning to the Corinthians, Paul allows friends from the churches in Macedonia to support him. This would have bothered the Corinthians because the Macedonians were considered to be of a lower class. Paul chose not to burden the Corinthians, but instead to accept help from another group of believers. In 2 Cor. 8-9 we learn that the Macedonians had a different perspective regarding money. This probably plays into Paul’s decision to have no monetary ties to Corinth. Although it was Paul’s policy to not draw a salary from his churches, he certainly did accept monetary gifts at different points in his ministry. He only accepted the money if the relationship with the church was cordial.<sup>4</sup> Although Paul had personal policies regarding how and when he would accept financial assistance, he did have guidelines regarding elders and those who remained in a congregation to preach and teach. In 2 Tim. 5:17-18 he states that the laborer is worthy of his wages. That Paul refuses monetary assistance is evidence that the Corinthians are misguided in money matters and Paul would rather not participate in this system.

Despite the pain this decision might cause the Corinthians, Paul follows up with an oath to them. “As the truth of Christ is in me,” is considered a declaration of a Christian oath. The content of the oath is that Paul’s boasting throughout these regions will not be stopped. Paul quotes Jer. 9:24 in 2 Cor. 10:17, stating that he boasts in the Lord. Paul has no intention of submitting to the accusations that he is outside of his territory. He has no intention of packing his bags and leaving his ministry behind to that of the false teachers. Paul will continue to preach and teach and minister in this area regardless of the challenges that he faces. In 11:11 Paul answers the core charge underlying the financial issues, that the Corinthians believe he does not love them. Paul answers this charge with an emphatic exclamation, “God knows I do!” The heart of a pastor peeks out of Paul’s speech as he declares the depth of his love to this church. Much like a father asking a child to trust in his wisdom even though it may be difficult to see at the time, Paul asks the Corinthians to stand firm in the love that he has for them and to interpret his actions toward them through this lens. Paul then continues to explain to them that he does have a specific reason for his actions and that is to expose the intentions of the false teachers. The false teachers have placed themselves on equal ground as Paul. They came to Corinth to teach, accepted money, and worked their way into the congregation. Paul makes the point that his decision to decline financial assistance distances himself from these men who are boasting in a different manner. Paul is treating the Corinthians with love and respect whereas the false teachers in their attempt to claim the same ground as Paul are in reality being exposed.

## **2 Corinthians 11:13-15**

In this next section, Paul removes the humor and exaggeration from his intonation and makes direct accusations against the false teachers. It is not a matter of rhetorical style, charisma, or even financial principles. These men are serving Satan

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 345.

and not Christ. Paul's opinion is very candid. He calls these men "false apostles," "deceitful workers," "masqueraders," and "servants of Satan." 2 Cor. 11:13 tells us exactly how Paul feels. These men have transformed or disguised themselves as apostles. They have presented themselves as having the same credentials as Paul and yet they are riddled with deceit. Paul has judged by both their teaching and their treatment of the Corinthians that they are inauthentic. Whether the false apostles understood what they were doing or not, they were in the process of drawing the Corinthians away from the truth of Christ. In 11:14, Paul offers the insight that even Satan disguised himself as an angel of light. Paul makes the point that even the archetype of evil is able to disguise his nature so as to appear to be the opposite and attract people into his deception. If Satan himself can appear as light, is it any surprise that his servants can disguise their true nature and present themselves as servants of righteousness? With this verse Paul holds nothing back. Any teaching that detracts from the true message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is Satanic. As Paul has stated before, there will be a final judgment and we will be held accountable for our deeds. Although Paul vehemently defends and protects his beloved Corinthians, he entrusts the future of these false teachers to the judicious nature of Christ. Righteousness is paramount to believer's standing. In 2 Cor. 5:21 Paul explains that we become the righteousness of God through Christ and His act of taking our sin upon Himself of the cross. This truth is so amazing that it can be difficult to believe. The false apostles are guilty of this and based on their adherence to the law of Moses, they were likely presenting a righteousness that is based on works. It is in this sense that Paul calls them ministers of righteousness because it is a false righteousness. There is only one work that proclaims a person righteous and that is the work of Christ on the cross. Paul views these false apostles as intruders whose intent is to steal the Corinthians away to a false system of belief. Paul has shown tremendous love and patience in guiding this church to belief. It is out of love that he issues his staunchest warning to them regarding the wolves that have entered into their midst. This warning stands today as the church is constantly barraged with the message that we need to be doing more. We are loved and accepted for who we are based on what Christ has done for us. We need to be vigilant in examining what is presented to us against this great truth.

**SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS**  
**2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-15**

**Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-4**

**2 Corinthians 11:1-4**

*I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me. <sup>2</sup> For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin. <sup>3</sup> But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. <sup>4</sup> For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully.*

- 1. Have you ever encountered teachings about Jesus that looked very much like the truth but may have been slightly different? If so, what were they?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2. How did you come to know that the teachings were in error (or how can we discern the truth in what we read or are taught)?**

**Read 2 Corinthians 11:5-6**

**2 Corinthians 11:5-6**

*<sup>5</sup> For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. <sup>6</sup> But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things.*

- 3. Do you agree with Paul that knowledge (personal knowledge of God as opposed to factual knowledge of God) is more important than eloquence of speech?**
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4. Do you feel like you have a personal knowledge of God? If yes, why? If no, what can you do to grow in this area?**

## Read 2 Corinthians 11:7-12

### 2 Corinthians 11:7-12

<sup>7</sup> Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? <sup>8</sup> I robbed other churches by taking wages from them to serve you; <sup>9</sup> and when I was present with you and was in need, I was not a burden to anyone; for when the brethren came from Macedonia they fully supplied my need, and in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and will continue to do so. <sup>10</sup> As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be stopped in the regions of Achaia. <sup>11</sup> Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! <sup>12</sup> But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting.

**5. In this passage Paul defends his decision to not accept financial assistance from the church in Corinth, although he did accept financial assistance from the Macedonians. Why do you think Paul did this?**

**6. Have you ever witnessed financial conflict within the church? What was it like?**

## Read 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

### 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

<sup>13</sup> For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

**7. If a modern day false apostle were to walk into your church, what do you think he or she would look like? What do you think he or she would teach?**

**8. Why do you think the Corinthians were unable to recognize these deceitful workers? What can we do to protect ourselves?**