

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS FOR 1/31/10
2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-33

2 Corinthians 11:16-21a

In this next passage, Paul continues the introduction of the “Fool’s Speech” begun in 11:1. The introduction reveals the deep devotion he has for the Corinthians as he bears the responsibility of keeping them pure in their faith. He defends his decision to financially distance himself from the Corinthians. He makes stark accusations against the false apostles who have exerted their influence over the Corinthians and he expresses his disbelief that they have chosen to put up with these teachers whose intent is to harm them. Paul will continue in this vein as he begins his humorous, biting self-comparison to the false teachers. In 11:16-21a, Paul will answer to the charges that he is foolish and weak by providing the commendation that the Corinthians are seeking. Paul concedes to his audience that if they desire what the false teachers represent: boasting, self-commendation, worldly ambition, abusive power, flamboyant speech and showy displays of spirituality, then he will also boast. If it is foolishness they want, because they tolerate it so willingly, then he will be foolish on their behalf.

In 11:16, Paul begins by repeating the thought presented in 11:1; that they would bear with him in a little foolishness. He makes it clear that he will not admit to accusations of foolishness, rather this is an exercise in hypothetical suppositions. As Paul continues, he addresses both the Corinthians and his accusers (“no one” 11:16, “anyone” 5x; 11:20). Essentially Paul says, if you believe those who accuse him of being foolish then he will entertain those accusations and stoop to the same tactics of the false teachers. In this passage, the term fool is being used in its technical sense “of the person in Hellenistic Roman society who had lost the correct measure of himself and the world around him,” not in the sense of someone who is dim-witted or jester-like.¹ In this clever self-parody Paul exposes the foolishness of his accusers and the Corinthians and redefines the term “foolish” as a godly characteristic of one who does submit himself to the trials and travails of the ministry to which God has called him. Paul will boast in this accusation. In 2 Cor. 10:18, Paul made it clear that it is not self-commendation and boasting that proves a person’s calling. Rather it is the one who boasts in the Lord who in turn is commended by the Lord. In 11:17, Paul admits that this detour into foolishness is not the way in which God would have him express himself as their pastor, but Paul needs to speak in terms that the Corinthians will understand and so he adopts a mantle of boasting in his foolishness in order to get his message through. In 11:18, Paul views boasting as something according to the flesh, or worldly in expression. Paul has already accused his opponents of taking pride in outward appearance and not in the heart (2 Cor. 5:12, a passage which also recalls Paul’s compelling love for the Corinthians). Paul will assume a similar position as the false teachers by boasting in the flesh, but as we will see in the following passage, Paul will turn their expectations upside down by boasting in his suffering and weakness. In 11:19, Paul justifies his need for this tactic, which is because they tolerate foolishness

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, p. 362.

so sweetly. The Corinthians have openly invited these false teachers into their midst, surely there is room for Paul too.

In 11:20, Paul follows up on his previous accusations against the false teachers (11:13-15) by turning his attention to the fact that the Corinthians have endured horrible treatment on behalf of those who claim to be true apostles. Paul lists 5 separate actions, all of which are preceded by “if anyone” thus driving home the extent to which the false teachers have penetrated the minds and hearts of the Corinthians and taken advantage of them. The Corinthians have been enslaved (subjected to a domineering style of leadership), devoured (to eat up, or exploit them for their own gain), taken advantage of (snared or caught in a trap), subjected to a form of superior leadership (the false teachers “push themselves forward”), and hit in the face (this may either refer to a humiliating experience or possibly a situation in which there was a form of physical violence against them).² Paul’s ministry with the Corinthians stands in stark contrast. He is compelled by love (2 Cor. 5:10), he has made a point to serve them and not lord his status over them (2 Cor. 1:24), and he operates under the understanding that he is ultimately accountable to Christ for his own actions (2 Cor. 5:11). If one is to weigh whether or not they are a “fool” by their behavior, it should be clear that both the false teachers and the Corinthians are operating in foolishness. To make the point more evident, Paul concludes with 11:21 where he compares himself to the false teachers and mockingly concludes that he certainly has been weak in his treatment toward the Corinthians. 2 Cor. 11:21a will serve to introduce the “Fool’s Speech” which will follow. Paul admits his weakness when evaluated against the behavior of the false teachers. The next passage will further develop the many ways in which Paul’s “weaknesses” have been manifest in his life and ministry. The next section will continue to compare Paul’s “weaknesses” to the “wisdom” and “strength” of the false teachers.

2 Corinthians 11:21b-33: The Fool’s Speech

This next section begins what is termed “the Fool’s Speech proper.” It starts in 11:21b and continues through 12:10. Previously in this letter we have encountered a list of Paul’s travails in ministry (2 Cor. 6:4-10). Paul consistently views his own suffering in ministry as identifying with the suffering of Christ and as a by-product of his calling. The Corinthians mistook Paul’s suffering for weakness and so Paul takes this opportunity to revel in the rhetorical effect of the “foolishness” of the detailed and heart-wrenching afflictions that he has suffered as a result of bringing the gospel to the Gentile world. Paul Barnett calls the Fool’s Speech “a daring countercultural exercise.”³ Rather than boast in his glory, Paul boasts in his weaknesses and injustices. In 11:21b, Paul writes that he boasts just as his opponents do, and so his opening words likely mirror their claims to be superior to Paul. In 11:21b-23, Paul answers to their criticism: Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendents of

² Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 533.

³ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 529.

Abraham? So am I. The first three terms are descriptive of the spiritual and ethnic heritage of the false teachers. To be Hebrew was to be a pure-blooded Jew, but it is likely that it also referred to a person born in Palestine. If this is the case, the false teachers probably had a personal knowledge of Jesus' ministry and may have accused Paul of not having been present during Jesus' earthly ministry. Paul makes it clear that he had a personal experience with Jesus on the Damascus road and that this experience is the root of his call to ministry. To be an Israelite was to belong to the covenant community of God, to share in the history of God's relationship with the nation Israel. To be a descendant of Abraham, or the seed of Abraham, is to be part of the fulfillment of covenant promised long ago, that God would be a blessing to Israel and use Israel to bless the nations. Paul's depth of understanding of the Abrahamic covenant places him in a category above that of his detractors. Everything that the false teachers claim for themselves can also be said about the apostle Paul. The fourth claim, that they are servants of Christ, is a major point of contention between Paul and the false teachers. Paul calls himself a servant of Christ and previously he called his opponents servants of Satan. He makes the bold assertion that his claim to this title far supersedes that of the false teachers. With a bold stroke, Paul writes, "I speak as if insane," or it is a mad claim that they are servants of Christ. The manner in which Paul can claim the title of being "more so" a servant of Christ, will be spelled out in 2 Cor. 11:23b-27.

In this next section, 11:23b-27, Paul goes on to describe the extreme danger that has been his lot as a result of his calling as a servant of Christ. As he boasts in his weakness, Paul offers the challenge to his opponents, "Can you say this about your own ministry?" Paul begins cataloguing his hardships with broad categories. In 11:23b he writes of labors, imprisonments, beatings, and close calls with death, all of which will be expanded upon. In 11:24 Paul writes that 5 times he received punishment from the Jews, 39 lashes. Although there are numerous accounts of Paul's run-ins with the Jews in the book of Acts, Luke does not record the lashings of which Paul writes. Nonetheless, Paul states that at least 5 times he was punished. Deut. 25:3 prescribes a punishment of no more than 40 lashes for a man who is determined wicked and guilty by the court. Later in Judaism, it was determined that 39 lashes could be administered, but not more, so as not to break the commandment. There were numerous offenses for which this punishment could be inflicted, but neither Paul nor Luke provides the details for us. Paul writes that he also received the Roman punishment of being beaten with rods three times. Paul was a Roman citizen and should have been spared this treatment, but there were likely occasions when a Roman leader may have disregarded Paul's citizenship and implemented the punishment as a public warning. Paul writes that additionally he was stoned; a punishment implemented by the Jews in cases of blasphemy, adultery, and apostasy (Deut. 17:5; 22:22-24). This instance is recorded in Acts 14:19. On Paul's first missionary journey, in Lystra, he is stoned by a certain group of Jews that had been following him from town to town. Perturbed by his ministry of teaching and healing, they sought to kill him, although there was no formal charge and no court. Paul survived this stoning only to continue on in his missionary activity the very next day.

Paul's catalogue of dangerous circumstances continues as he records being shipwrecked three times and having spent 24 hours floating in the sea. We know from the book of Acts of one occurrence where Paul is shipwrecked, but this account is written after 2 Corinthians leaving us uncertain of the details surrounding the three shipwrecks mentioned here. Much of Paul's missionary travel had to be made via ships and without modern navigational equipment, shipwrecks occurred often. The most harrowing event however, was being stranded at sea for a full day. In 11:24-25, Paul recounts no less than 11 examples of intense physical danger. Other than Jack Bauer, there are very few people who experience repeated close calls with death, and find their lives continuously spared. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Paul views his sufferings as authenticating his call as an apostle.

To labors, imprisonments, beatings, and exposure to death, Paul now adds "journeys" to his list of afflictions suffered. In his journeys, Paul chronicles 8 dangers associated with his missionary travels. The first set of dangers, rivers and robbers, would be common hindrances to travelers during the first century. There were few bridges and flooding was also a threat. In addition, there were robbers who laid in wait to burglarize travelers who ventured away from the protection of larger cities. The next pair of dangers comes both from Paul's countrymen and from Gentiles. Much has been recorded in the book of Acts regarding Paul's travails at the hand of certain Jews and Gentiles. Paul routinely found himself in the middle of riotous crowds, the city of Corinth being no exception. Paul now strings together a third list of three dangers: in the city, in the wilderness, and on the sea. Paul's territory is all encompassing. In his missionary travels, Paul covered almost ever terrain and endured every associated peril. Paul went wherever the Spirit led him. The final danger Paul lists is that of "false brothers." The position at the end of the list serves to highlight the importance of this subject and the danger that their presence posed to the Corinthian church. In 11:26, Paul calls the false brothers "pseudo-brothers." Earlier he referred to them as "pseudo-apostles" (11:13), a repetition of prefix that is certainly intentional. We do not know what specific dangers the pseudo-brothers pose to Paul, but we do know that they have put the Corinthians at risk which deeply troubles our apostle. Paul summarizes his list of external dangers in 11:27. He has been in labor, toiling at his profession of tent making. He has worked long hours, often forgoing sleep. He has been hungry and thirsty. He has been exposed to the elements. This long list of troubles touches every aspect of Paul's physical comfort. This is a picture of a servant of Christ, intent on bringing the gospel to every area that God calls him. This is a picture of a man who listened to the Spirit's leading and who did not turn back when his life became difficult. Paul writes that it is for the joy set before him that he endured his travails. So it was with Christ: for the joy set before Him, he endured the cross, despising the shame (Heb. 12:2).

The previous verses spoke to the external pressures that Paul faced as a missionary, the next verses (11:28-33) provide a glimpse of the great concern Paul had for this church. Paul writes of the "daily pressure of concern for all the churches." He is not simply making converts. These are his children and it pains him deeply to think that the Corinthians are being led astray by these peddlers and deceivers. Paul is not about to let a group of false brothers come into the Corinthian church and threaten the gospel

of reconciliation. Following his exclamation of concern, Paul asks two questions: Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? The two questions together reveal Paul's heart for the church. Paul identifies with the Corinthians in their weakness. Through his own personal pain, he understands and he cares for them when they suffer, when they are in need, when they are misunderstood. Paul has had his own trials and he can comfort the Corinthians as they go through difficulties of their own. To those who stumble into sin (are enticed into evil or that which is false), Paul writes that he is burning with concern for them. He is a father who loves his children and desires the best for them. Ralph Martin writes, "Pastoral care of this kind is what Paul regards as the truest sign of being an apostle: 'not one's performance of wonders but rather one's love for the community.'"⁴

In 11:30, Paul returns to the theme of boasting, reminding his readers that he is in the midst of comparing his ministry to that of the false teachers. Although Paul is accused of being weak, his weakness is that he has submitted himself to hardship and suffering, that he compassionately cares for those who are under his care, and that he resolutely refuses to conform to the expectations that others have of him. In the Corinthian society Paul's behavior may have appeared foolish, but from God's perspective Paul was operating in the power and strength of the Spirit. Paul's words in 11:31 echo what he has already promised in 11:10, "as the truth of Christ is in me." Paul swears (using the language of an oath) by the God and Father of the Lord Jesus that against the backdrop of the deceitfulness of the false teachers, that he is not lying. Paul is not lying about his love and concern for the Corinthians, Paul is not lying about his circumstances, and Paul is not lying about the deceitful nature of the false teachers. Paul calls God as his witness that he has been appointed by the Lord Jesus to care for this congregation. As an undergirding thought, Paul refers to an incident in 11:32-33 that is also recorded in Acts 9. Immediately following Paul's conversion, he began to preach powerfully in Damascus. Acts 9:22 says that Paul was increasing in strength and confounding the Jews. As a result they plotted to kill Paul and upon learning of the plan, the disciples lowered Paul in a basket through an opening in the wall. Paul calls this event to mind for several reasons. One reason may be that this was the first real trial Paul had endured in his ministry. As a result of his influential teaching, the Jews wanted Paul dead. To escape their death threats, he is placed in a position of humiliation as he was lowered down the wall. It is possible that Paul recounts this experience because his detractors referred to it as proof of his weakness. Paul does not deny that this is an example of weakness, but he cites this example in his self-parody of foolishness and this incident must be read with the tongue-in-cheek tone that should accompany it. There is also an allusion to military imagery which Paul has used richly throughout 2 Corinthians. There was a Roman military honor that went to the first soldier to scale the wall of an enemy city.⁵ In contrast to Roman ideas of heroism, Paul in fact went down the wall instead of climbing the wall. Paul again highlights the foolish notions of his weakness. Certainly, his detractors can view him as weak if they want,

⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 383.

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict in Community: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, p. 459.

but Paul's boasting is in the Lord and it is the Lord who spared his life and who carried through him through every difficult time so that the Gentile world would see the glory of Christ. The "Fool's Speech" will continue into chapter 12 and Paul will further present the case that it is in his weakness that Christ shines.

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS
2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-33

Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-21a

2 Corinthians 11:16 – 21a

¹⁶ Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. ¹⁹ For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. ²⁰ For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison.

- 1. How did the Corinthians perceive Paul?**

- 2. How did the Corinthians perceive the false teachers?**

- 3. Why do you think they tolerated being treated so harshly?**

- 4. Have you ever exhibited “foolish” (foolish being defined as following what God would have you do vs. what others might expect) behavior in your Christian life? How did others react? How did you handle it?**

Read 2 Corinthians 11:21b-33

2 Corinthians 11:21b-33

But in whatever respect anyone else is bold I speak in foolishness-- I am just as bold myself. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ?-- I speak as if insane-- I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

²⁸ *Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.* ²⁹ *Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?* ³⁰ *If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.* ³¹ *The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.* ³² *In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me,* ³³ *and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.*

5. Do you think that suffering is a valid marker of whether or not a person is effective in ministry? Why or why not?

6. Why do you think Paul uses his own suffering as proof of his calling?

7. What do you consider your weaknesses to be? How has God used them in your life?