

LESSON 21
2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-33

Boasting as “a fool.” 11:16 - 12:13.

Justification for foolish boasting. 11:16-21a.

16 I say again, let no man think me foolish; but if [ye do], yet as foolish receive me, that I also may glory a little.

17 That which I speak, I speak not after the Lord, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of glorying.

18 Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also.

19 For ye bear with the foolish gladly, being wise [yourselves].

20 For ye bear with a man, if he bringeth you into bondage, if he devoureth you, if he taketh you [captive], if he exalteth himself, if he smiteth you on the face.

21a I speak by way of disparagement, as though we had been weak.

V. 16

- 1) Paul now resumes from vv.1-6 the theme of foolish boasting, after he has digressed to defend his policy regarding financial support (vv.7-12) and to describe the true identity of his opponents (vv. 13-15).
 - a) He has decided to boast as his opponents do, because he knows the Corinthians' determination to compare him with his rivals and their vulnerability to those who commend themselves.
 - b) From 11:16 to 12:13 he engages in *ad hominem* argumentation, boasting about things that are not "boastworthy" and answering fools according to their folly (Prov. 26:5).
 - c) There was a danger, however, that some Corinthians might not see or wish to see that Paul was simply playing a part.
 - i) But even if they thought he was actually a fool and not just a play-actor, he solicits their indulgence as he does "a little boasting."
 - ii) Even if they think him foolish, he at least has a right to expect that, since they have given a welcome to those foolish boasters who have invaded Corinth, they will

receive him also as he engages in the foolishness of boasting for a short while.

- d) The whole tenor of his language here, his obvious embarrassment in discussing such a subject, conveys the impression more powerfully than a disclaimer could do that to speak of himself, who he is and what he has done and endured, is something thoroughly distasteful to him.
- e) It does not come naturally to a man who has denied self and whose whole being is now taken up with the person and work of Christ.
- f) His very awkwardness here as, in order to prick the balloon of these self-inflated deceivers who are undoing the work of the gospel in Corinth, he faces the necessity of commending himself in some measure, speaks volumes for his own genuine humility and sincerity.

Vv. 17-18

- 2) The reason for Paul's embarrassment is now given – self-commendation is not after the Lord, but is after the flesh, the exact opposite.
 - a) Under normal circumstances, Paul is saying (in vv.17, 18), his conduct and words as a servant of Christ and of the Corinthians (4:5; 11:23) would have been marked by "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (10:1), not the "self-confident boasting" of the fool (v. 17).
 - b) It was not the example of Christ (Phil. 2:5ff.), but the need to follow the example of his opponents (note the *kayo*, "I too" in vv. 16, 18) in order to win over the Corinthians, that had driven him to this desperate measure of self-exaltation.
 - c) It should not be the conduct of a Christian, because he has nothing that he has not received. 1 Cor. 4:7.
 - c) It was not Paul's normal conduct:
 - i) Rom. 7:18 – In the flesh dwelleth no good thing.
 - ii) Phil. 3:3 – Glory in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.
 - iii) Gal. 6:14 – Far be it from me to glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

- 3) As hesitant as Paul is to talk "as a fool," his reluctance is partially overcome when he recalls that his converts have grown accustomed to self-advertisement.
- a) Many (*polloi*, as in 2:17) at Corinth, as generally elsewhere, were bragging "in the way the world does," i.e., boasting of personal privileges and achievements (as Paul himself does, beginning at v.22).

Vv. 19-21a

- 4) Probably no verses in the epistle are more scathingly ironical than these.
- a) Not only do the Corinthians humor fools; they do so "gladly," because the folly of the fool serves to highlight the wisdom of "the wise" (*phronimoi*, as in 1 Cor 4:10).
- i) Their tolerance apparently had no limits.
- ii) They put up not only with the speech of fools but also with the despotism of tyrants.
- iii) Paul speaks of their foolishness as wisdom – you bear with the foolish gladly because you are wise yourselves.
- b) Paul gives five examples of the indignities with which the Corinthians had endured from the false apostles. (Paul is not speaking hypothetically; the implication is plain as to be almost explicit. He is describing what was actually taking place at Corinth.)
- i) They were being brought into a state of utter bondage, possibly to the ceremonial law of Judaism (cf. Gal. 2:4, 5:1).
- ii) They were being swallowed up in the sense that the intruding super-apostles were living on them like parasites and growing fat at their expense, serving "not our Lord Jesus Christ but their own belly" (Rom. 16:18; cf. Phil. 3:19). They had exploited them by greedily devouring any and all maintenance offered them (cf. Mark 12:40).
- iii) They had stood by, as it were, and watched these imposters exalt themselves to positions of authority to which they held no title and from which they sought, like earthly potentates, to lord it over the Corinthian flock.

- 1) Light is thrown on Paul's meaning here by what he has already said in 10:5 about every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God.
- 2) The exaltation of these upstart apostles is essentially self-exaltation, carnal and worldly in character, though speciously disguised by a cloak of sanctimony.
- iv) They had entrapped them with tantalizing bait (cf. Luke 5:5); they had put on airs of superiority and had gravely insulted and humiliated them.
- v) The Corinthians had even allowed themselves to be struck in the face.
 - 1) It was not unusual at that time for those who held positions of ecclesiastical authority to be struck in the face.
 - 2) Thus the High Priest Ananias commanded Paul to be struck (Acts 23:2; cf. 1 Cor. 4:11); Paul enjoined that a person who was a bishop should not be a striker (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- b) None of Paul's readers or hearers would have failed to catch his message with its indictment of their inconsistency.
 - i) Claiming to be followers of a meek, gentle Christ (10:1; cf. Matt 11:29), they were impressed by and willingly submitted to the aggressiveness and authoritarianism of teachers masquerading as apostles of Christ (v. 13); yet they were unimpressed by Paul's "weak" considerateness as a genuine "apostle of Christ Jesus" (1:1; 10:1, 10).
 - ii) Paul has to confess with shame (but really with biting irony) that his character had been too weak and his disposition too mild to use the tactics of the opposition (v.21a!)
 - 1) At this point Paul's irony reaches its peak – He confesses his shame that when compared with these super apostles he has been weak.
 - 2) His opponents in Corinth had been accusing him of being strong in his letters but weak in his presence (cf. 10:10), thereby wishing to disparage him, but also to justify the harshness of their own regime.
 - 3) To this Paul now offers the effective rejoinder that if tyranny, greed, falsity, arrogance, and violence are the marks of true Christian oversight, then he must

admit shamefacedly that as an apostle to Corinth he has indeed been a failure and a weakling (cf. 1:24).

Paul's heritage and trials. 11:21b-29.

21b Yet whereinsoever any is bold (I speak in foolishness), I am bold also.

22 Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.

23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as one beside himself) I more; in labors more abundantly, in prisons more abundantly, in stripes above measure, in deaths oft.

24 Of the Jews five times received I forty [stripes] save one.

25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep;

26 [in] journeyings often, [in] perils of rivers, [in] perils of robbers, [in] perils from [my] countrymen, [in] perils from the Gentiles, [in] perils in the city, [in] perils in the wilderness, [in] perils in the sea, [in] perils among false brethren;

27 [in] labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

28 Besides those things that are without, there is that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches.

29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is caused to stumble, and I burn not?

Vv. 21b, 22

5) Already Paul has made several efforts to begin sustained boasting (see 10:8; 11:1, 6, 16).

a) Boasting.

i) Because of Christian influence on Western values, boasting has been regarded as brash and impolite; in Paul's day it was not so.

ii) Citizens and soldiers, without embarrassment and as a social convention, outdid one another in boasting of military and personal accomplishments.

iii) These were listed on monuments or public buildings, depicted in household mural, or set forth in epic narratives.

iv) A good example is the *Res Gestae* of the Emperor

Augustus in which he proudly recounts his many victories, official positions in Roman society, successfully completed buildings and other accomplishments.

v) Boasting was also common among the Jews; the Pharisee in the temple boasted of his religious accomplishments (Lk. 18:1-12).

b) Now he finally brings himself to this distasteful task.

i) No bold claim made by his rivals will go unmatched (v.21b).

ii) So to the first three claims mentioned, he responds with the simple, disarming word *kayo*, "so am I."

(1) The designation "Hebrews" may be taken in two ways.

(a) It was used to denote ethnic purity, as in the expression, "a Hebrew."

(2) Paul was born at Tarsus in the "foreign" territory of Cilicia.

(3) Was it really credible that pure Hebrew blood ran in his veins?

(b) It was used to distinguish Aramaic speaking Jews who generally lived in Palestine (Hebrews) from Greek-speaking Jews generally of the dispersion (Hellenists, cf. Acts 6:1). (This second distinction was not as clear cut as it might seem, because the inscription "Synagogue of the Hebrews" found in Corinth shows, even Jews of the dispersion referred to themselves as "Hebrews.")

(c) Paul is probably using the term in the first sense: whether he was brought up in Tarsus or in Jerusalem, Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage (Phil 3:5).

(2) It is difficult to know if "Israelites" is distinguished from "Hebrews" in Paul's mind.

(a) Some suggest that since Gentiles could be admitted into Israel.

(b) Some suggest that this is no more than a designation of the better conclusion; too many try to make too much of every linguistic turn made by speaker or writer, as if they had never heard of synonyms.)

- (3) Once again, it is difficult to see what distinction, if any, is intended between the terms “Israelites,” “Hebrews,” and “descendants of Abraham.”
- (a) One suggestion is that if “Hebrews” is to be understood ethnically, it refers to the descendants of Abraham’s offspring.
- (b) As a descendant of Abraham who had been promised (Eph 2:12).

V. 23-25

- 6) When Paul turns from the matter of nationality (v.22) to that of achievement (vv.23-29), he lays claim to superiority over his rivals, not simply equality with them, and begins to speak as a madman (v.23), not simply as a fool (vv.16, 17, 21).
- a) Although he compares himself with both the "super-apostles" and the "false apostles," in the former case the comparison is negative ("I am not in the least inferior," 11:5; 12:11), in the latter case it is positive ("...more...much harder...more frequently...more severely," v.23).
- b) In the light of v.13, where the false apostles are called "deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ," it might seem unlikely that Paul, by implication, would here concede his opponents to be "servants of Christ."
- i) But note that "Are they...?" means "Do they claim to be...?" and that in v.13 is found Paul's estimate of them, in v.23 their estimate of themselves, which Paul concedes for the sake of the comparison that follows.
- c) At v.23 Paul's list of "accomplishments" begins, but unlike the imperial *res gestae* Paul's list recounts not triumphs but apparent defeats and relates not to strengths but "weaknesses" (11:30; 12:5,9,10).
- i) This accords with his view that lowliness and weakness as seen in Christian service provide the only incontestable vindication of apostleship.
- ii) If we compare this list of Paul's sufferings (cf. 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-12; 6:4, 5) with the account of his experiences given in Acts, it immediately becomes clear how fragmentary, but not how unreliable, Luke's record is.

- iii) Since the writing of 2 Corinthians fits into Luke's account at Acts 20:2a, only the events recorded before this verse relate to the comparison.
- (1) To be sure, Luke gives ample proof of Paul's hard work (v.23) and records his stoning at Lystra (v.25; Acts 14:19).
 - (2) But he mentions only one imprisonment (cf. v.23) before Acts 20—that at Philippi (Acts 16:23-40)—and only one of his three (Roman?) beatings with rods (v.25), also at Philippi (Acts 16:22, 23).
 - (3) From Acts we know nothing of other imprisonments (v.23; cf. 1 Clement 5:6).
 - (4) Those at Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome occurred later.
 - (5) Nor do we know about the five whippings in Jewish synagogical courts (v.24), about the other two beatings at the hands of Gentiles (v.25, but note 2 Tim 3:11), or about the three shipwrecks and the night and day in the open sea, probably clinging to wreckage while awaiting rescue (cf. the later shipwreck, Acts 27:13-44).

Vv. 26-27

- 2) From specific hardships (vv.24, 25) Paul turns to the dangers he confronted (v.26) and the privations he endured (v.27; cf. 6:5).
 - a) In speaking of "danger from rivers" and "danger from bandits" he would be thinking especially of crossing the Taurus range between Perga in Pamphylia and Antioch in Phrygia near Pisidia (Acts 13:14; 14:24), a journey made hazardous by the mountain torrents and the predatory Pisidian highlanders.
 - b) Acts records several examples of Jewish plots against Paul's life before this time (e.g., Acts 9:23, 29; 14:19; 18:12) but only two incidents involving "danger from Gentiles" (at Philippi, Acts 16:16-40; and at Ephesus, Acts 19:23-41). "Danger from false brothers" may point to Paul's being betrayed to local authorities by counterfeit Christians and the resulting reprisals.
 - c) Paul's "sleepless nights" (*agrypniai*, as in 6:5) could refer to insomnia because of physical discomfort or illness, but more

probably the phrase alludes to voluntary sleeplessness from pressure of work.

- i) Paul may have undertaken some of his voluntary fasts ("I . . . have often gone without food"; cf. 6:5) because of his determination not to accept support from the Corinthians (1 Cor 9:12, 15, 18; 2 Cor 11 :7-12).

Vv. 28-29

- 3) None of the afflictions mentioned in vv.23-27 was a continuous experience.
 - a) Paul's crowning trial and privilege was, however, incessant—the daily pressure of his anxious concern (*merimna*) for all the churches (cf. Acts 20:18-21, 28-31).
 - b) If his trials at Corinth were any indication, the total burden he always bore must have been well nigh oppressive.
 - c) Yet Paul did not violate the teaching of Jesus about anxiety (cf. Matt 6:25-34, where the verbal form of *merimna* occurs frequently).
 - i) His concern arose from seeking first the kingdom of God; he was grappling realistically with present, not future problems; and he had no anxiety about the relatively trivial matters of food and clothing (as v.27 shows).
 - ii) But as a faithful servant," he shared the constant burden of the Chief Shepherd with regard to all the sheep.
 - d) This total identification of shepherd with sheep, or of spiritual father with children in the faith, is now illustrated (v.29). Paul was at one with all his converts (cf.1 Cor 12:26), sympathizing with their weakness in faith, conduct or conscience (cf. 1 Cor 8:7-13; 9:22).
 - i) It is difficult to know what Paul means when he says, "I inwardly burn" (29b).
 - ii) The following suggestions have been made:
 - (1) He was fired with indignation at the person who caused another to sin (cf. Matt 18:6; 1 Cor 8:10-13; Gal 5:12, and the present situation with the false apostles);
 - (2) His heart burned with shame when a Christian brother fell or when someone dishonored the name of Christ;

- (3) He was so ablaze with compassion for the person who was "led into sin" that he shared his remorse.
- iii) Perhaps all three were involved, though the last view best suits the context.

Escape from Damascus. 11:30-33.

30 If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things that concern my weakness.

31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for evermore knoweth that I lie not.

32 In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king guarded the city of the Damascenes in order to take me:

33 and through a window was I let down in a basket by the wall, and escaped his hands.

Vv. 30-33

- 4) For a moment Paul pauses and reflects on the paragraph he has just dictated to his stunned amanuensis.
 - a) Both he and his opponents might boast, but *his* boasting was distinctive, since, paradoxically, he prided himself on evidences of his weakness that became evidences of God's surpassing power in supporting and delivering him (cf. 1:8-10; 3:5; 4:7, 10, 11; 12:5, 9, 10).
 - b) Because he had been so precise in describing his afflictions and perils (see especially vv.24, 25), he realized that the record sounded not only incredible but also out of keeping for an apostle and that his rivals might easily dismiss it as gross exaggeration.
 - i) Hence his appeal to the divine omniscience (cf. 1:18; 11:10-11 and Rom 9:1; Gal 1:20; 1 Tim 2:7).
 - ii) Such an invocation of God as a witness or testimony to his truthfulness (v.31) was not, of course, a repudiation of Christ's ban on unnecessary or frivolous swearing (Matt 5:33-37; James 5:12).
 - iii) The trustworthiness of Paul's word had been impugned (cf. 1:17, 18).

Vv. 32-33

- 5) After the solemn invocation of v.31, the account of a nocturnal escape from Damascus might seem trivial and out of place.
- a) Perhaps Paul mentions the episode because it had shattered the residual pride of Saul the Pharisee (cf. Acts 9: 1, 2) and had become the supreme example of the humiliation and weakness he was boasting about (v.30).
 - b) Or he may be referring to it because his detractors had used it to ridicule him and prove his cowardice (cf. 10:1, 10).
 - c) Or again, he may be speaking of it because it was probably the first attempt on his life and such a significant reversal of roles (Acts 9:1, 2!) that it had been indelibly impressed on his memory.
 - d) Whatever the reason for its inclusion here, the episode forms a suitable backdrop for what follows: an embarrassing descent to escape the hands of men and then an exhilarating ascent into the presence of God (12:2-4).