



Humility and Boldness

Read 2 Cor. 10:1-5

In these last chapters of 2nd Corinthians, Paul will turn more aggressively to defend his ministry and to fight those who oppose him in Corinth. This is characteristic of Paul in the sense that his polemic against his opponents can only truly be understood through the mystery of Christ and his crucifixion. This is why Paul doesn't simply "go after" his opponents, but rather spends significant time reflecting on relevant mysteries of faith. Paul references here an accusation (sarcastically) against him which claims that he is humble (*tapienos*) in their presence, but bold (*tharreo*) while away and writing.

Humility and boldness both have their place, but for Paul they are to be understood in and through Christ, and not in the way the world commonly takes them. Paul takes up a theme common to his thinking: living and thinking "according to the flesh". In the latter part of verse 2 the RSV translates the Greek as "acting in a worldly fashion" Paul's word here however is not "worldly", *sarks* in the Greek is *flesh*. In verse 3 he says that though we live "*en sarkē*" we are not fighting "*kata sarka*". A more literal translation would say that although we live "in the flesh", we are not fighting "according to the flesh".

What does it mean to fight according to the flesh? Why don't Christians do this?

Read Ephesians 6:10-20

Read Galatians 5:16-26

These are some of the many passages where Paul talks about the flesh, and the normal counter principle to the flesh is the Spirit. Paul's condemnation of the flesh **doesn't** mean that our literal physical bodies are evil; rather the question is "whose in the driver's seat"? The normal human way of living in the world is to allow our passions drive our thinking and behavior. The Christian however lives by the Spirit, and while we live *in* the flesh, Christians are driven by the Spirit of God, and we do not live *according* to the flesh, bowing to its desires.

Paul does want to win against his opponents, but what victory means and the mode by which it is achieved are radically different from what the flesh would desire. Jesus sets the course for what Christian power and prestige look like in Mark's gospel after James and John ask for positions of honor and power in the Kingdom.

You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

Paul was the founder of the church at Corinth (10:14-15), and as one commissioned by Christ, he knows that the authority he has is not for his own gain, and not to tear down, but to build (10:8).

Divine Jealousy

Read 2 Cor. 11:1-6

As the founder of the Church at Corinth, Paul now compares himself to the father of the bride about to give his daughter away. In vs. 4, Paul worries about the Corinthians accepting "another Jesus", a "different Spirit" or a "different Gospel".

Are there different forms of Jesus preached in the Christian world today? How does a Christian discern which is the true image?

It is common today for people to assume that all the Christian churches are essentially the same, and the differences fall merely on the level of personal taste. Truth however is one, it doesn't contradict itself, and Paul is at pains that the Corinthians embrace the pure Gospel as it came from him and ultimately from Christ, as he says more strongly in Galatians:

Not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. ~Galatians 1:7-8~

The rise of the “non-denominational” church today is largely due to protestant denominations growing exhausted from fighting over doctrine. Non-denominational churches are still today an attempt to strip the Gospel message to as bare of a message as possible so as to avoid conflict. While unity is an important goal, a unity that jettisons the content of Christian teaching cannot be the unity Christ established from the beginning.

Read 2 Cor. 11:7-11

In Roman times Paul’s refusal of money from those he ministered to may have been considered shameful. The expectation that a minister or preacher should be supported by his congregation would have squared well with Roman assumptions, and Paul even admits the just nature of such a relationship:

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? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?...Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ~1 Cor 9:6-7, 12b~

Paul’s refusal to receive a living from his preaching of the Gospel is oddly enough a point of contention with the Corinthians, if Paul is the real deal apostle, why would his preaching not be his livelihood? For St. Paul however, the message he preaches must be embodied in the messenger. This is a theme we have seen before, but compare a few passages:

Did I commit a sin in abasing myself so that you might be exalted... (2 Cor. 11:7)

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. (1 Cor 9:19)

Though he was in the form of God, [Christ] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:9)

Well might Paul say: “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”¹

¹ 1 Cor. 11:1

Wolves in Sheep's clothing

Read 2 Cor. 11:12-15

Here, Paul openly condemns his opponents, who claim apostolic authority, but whom Paul clearly regards as imposters.

How can we tell if someone has legitimate authority, and is not “disguising” themselves?

Paul's Sufferings

Read 2 Cor. 11:16-33

Paul here enters into “foolishness” as Michael Gorman puts it: “the entire speech is a parody of his rivals’ foolish, inflated self-praise for the wrong kind of status. In fact, the speech also mocks the entire Roman culture of celebrating power in accomplishments, offering instead a celebration of divine power in human weakness.”²

Paul boasts of his Jewish status as a mockery of the claims of his opponents, showing that he has all the things they have, if not to a greater degree, yet boasting of these things is the antithesis of the attitude of Christ.

Paul’s sufferings are manifold, but like Christ, his love for the churches (vs. 28) are manifested through suffering love – once again the messenger is the message. Once again we see that because of the cross of Christ, Christians view suffering from a different angle from the rest of the world. Rather than merely being something to avoid, suffering became the locus of salvation for the world, something that is echoed in the lives of those who follow after Christ.

Finally, in verses 30-33, Paul recounts how he escaped death by being lowered down the wall in Damascus. The irony is in full force here; one of the great honors a warrior could receive in Roman

² Michael Gorman *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* Eerdmans publishing, Grand Rapids 2004. Pg. 325

days was the *corona muralis* – the crown for the wall, an honor which went to the first soldier to scale an enemy wall in a conquest. Not only does Paul not claim this honor for himself, he openly displays his weakness by running from a pagan governor, reversing the triumphal scaling of a wall.

The point is that anyone who boasts in their own accomplishments is surely missing the whole point of being a minister of Christ who humbled instead of exalting himself. This is why Paul interjects in his speech “I am speaking as a fool” and “I am talking like a madman”. In Christ, all human boasting has been turned upside down.

For Next Time

- *Pray and think about what you boast about in your life*
- *Listen the next time you hear someone boasting about an accomplishment, and contrast that to the attitude of Christ who took the place of a slave.*
- *Look for an opportunity to humble yourself when you could exalt yourself: Don't mention an accomplishment, take the lowest place, serve others when you could be served!!!*
- *Read 2 Corinthians 12 & 13*