

REAL CREDENTIALS

By Steve Zeisler

We've come to one of the more remarkable sections in the New Testament. Paul's autobiographical account here is one of the most important passages we can turn to for information about what happened to the earliest Christians. I hope you'll find this challenging and enlightening as I have.

I remember many years ago going with a group of friends to a carnival. There were rides, games, food, and other attractions typical of a carnival. In addition, there was an artist who set up a stall and drew caricatures of people. It would take him 90 seconds or so. He would stare at you for a minute and ask you one or two questions about your life. Then using colored chalk he would create a tiny body with a great big head. I had my own done. It turned out to be a funny-looking figure that was obviously me, but I was sure my nose wasn't that big or my eyebrows that silly. The picture was deliberately distorted enough to highlight some features that wouldn't be so noticeable normally. Caricatures do that: They are based on reality, but they exaggerate and reveal things that might otherwise be hidden from us.

In this passage before us this morning, Paul engages in irony and caricature, if you will, in which he says things in a way that is peculiar for him. Paul is ordinarily a straightforward, persuasive writer and speaker, but here, as we'll see, he uses a different style to make a point that I found wonderfully encouraging.

Spiritual caricature

This section is written as a challenge to the pseudo-Christian leadership that had entered Corinth and was capturing the minds of the believers there. Beginning in chapter 10 Paul has been in direct debate with them. His earlier comments about these phony leaders were very straightforward. He said that the way he operated, who he was, and his convictions were in direct contrast with the convictions, style, and enterprise of his opponents. He wanted to make absolutely sure that no one confused them. But beginning now in chapter 11, verse 16, he says he is going to speak as if he were one of them. He will enter their world and caricature it, and the result will overturn their arguments. Verses 16-17:

I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool.

Now if we look back to verse 1 of chapter 10, we read this: "By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you." If he were speaking as the Lord would, he would speak in meekness and gentleness. He wouldn't be boasting about himself at all. He would be exalting another. That is the style in which Jesus lived, for the glory of his Father. But here Paul is saying he is speaking not as the Lord would, but as a fool. He is going to boast as his opponents in Corinth do. Verse 18:

Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.

Again, in chapter 10, verses 3 and 4, he says, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world." Here he's saying that since these people operate in a worldly fashion, he is going to temporarily do the same in order to turn their arguments on their heads. Verses 19-21:

You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

A subtle message

You may remember Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. In this play Caesar has been murdered by Brutus and others. At Caesar's funeral, Brutus stands up and justifies the killing of Caesar: He was an ambitious man, and they loved Rome so much that, although they hated killing him, they had to do it. Then Mark Antony, apparently agreeing with Brutus and serving his interests, stands up at Caesar's funeral and makes the speech that has become so familiar:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
But then he goes on in this speech to subtly and cleverly begin to praise Caesar, to unfold the greatness of his friend and undermine the words of Brutus.
He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honorable man.
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept;
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honorable man.

He continues on in this manner, talking about the "honorable Brutus" who has just slain this noble person, and at the end he has turned everybody against Brutus. Claiming he will not praise Caesar, Mark Antony actually elucidates the greatness of his friend.

Every man or woman who is rightly related to Jesus Christ is more valuable than can be described

There's something like that in what Paul is doing here. He speaks as a fool, and in boasting as his opponents do, he turns their boasting on its head. For Paul boasts, as he will finally say, of his weakness, because in the long run that glorifies Jesus, not him. He says he is going to speak as his opponents do, but in effect he does just the opposite.

Think of a play or story in which a gentleman walks in and says, "I'm just a poor country lawyer, and I'm no match for these city slickers." Every time you hear a line like this, you know what comes next, don't you? You know the city slickers have no chance whatever against this apparently soft-spoken, poor country lawyer. This was Jesus' role exactly in life. He was just a carpenter's son who lived in Galilee. His opponents were the brilliant, well-known, and self-promoting Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious establishment in Jerusalem. They took him on, hated him, and finally killed him, to their eventual dismay. They didn't realize that every time they attacked him his greatness would become more apparent. The more their antagonism against him grew, the more the favor of God rested upon him and the more the people could see that this was the Messiah himself. Paul is in that role a bit here, and we'll see how it turns out for him.

Being used

The last point I want to draw out from this paragraph is about the psychology of being taken advantage of. Verse 19 says, "You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!" Do you hear the irony there? Paul wasn't "tough" enough to kick the Corinthians when they were down, take all their money, make them look like idiots, or prey upon their inadequacy. He was too "weak" for that. But those who have come since, the lying pseudo-apostles,

have done all those things. It's not clear whether they actually physically slapped the Corinthians in the face or whether Paul is using that metaphorically. Either way, those who have come after Paul are preying upon the Christians in Corinth.

We're familiar with this phenomenon in our age, as in every other. There is much commentary in the media today about marriages that are abusive. Women marry men who abuse them and destroy their sense of well-being. These men are physically and emotionally hurtful people. And having been through it once, such women often choose to do it to themselves again. It's true of some men as well; men who more than once marry shrewish, angry, dominating women. Men who seem self-confident in other arenas choose to place themselves in homes in which they are derided and undermined. What is it that would ever make us put ourselves in a relationship with those who are hurtful to us? I've seen successful business people, who in their own field of endeavor are at the highest point, become childishly subservient in the presence of athletes who can't even speak in complete sentences. It's as if they revert to some kind of childhood hero worship in a role reversal that makes no sense at all. Yet some psychological phenomenon is taking place, and Paul is highlighting it here.

I think that what's taking place starts with a recognition in every human heart that there is something wrong with us. All of us, whether we can articulate it or not, know it. We're intuitively aware that we are not what we ought to be, and that if people could really see us for who we are, we would be ashamed and demeaned. It is that side of us that can make us prone to being taken advantage of. When these religious figures came to town, the ordinary Corinthian believers, knowing themselves to be inadequate, considered them great figures who knew languages they didn't, had insights they lacked, and so forth. These leaders were in their own self-analysis wonderful, godly, authoritative people. So the Corinthians thought that nobodies like themselves might naturally be taken advantage of, having found themselves in relationship with greatness. It is the sense of not being worth much that allows people to enter into relationships with those who will prey upon that weakness and use it to their own end.

Paul says he never did that. He didn't take their money, brutalize them emotionally, or promote some sort of childish subservience in them. We know the reason he didn't from the things he's written elsewhere. What Paul believed is what Christ taught him, which is that every child of God is royalty. The most ordinary believer in Corinth was worth treating respectfully; he was the equal of anyone else. Every man or woman who is rightly related to Jesus Christ is not valueless but more valuable than can be described, because what God has done for us in Christ is to take away our stain and our shame. He has filled us with himself. He has announced that we are to spend eternity with him. His blessing is upon us. Indeed, the deep love of Jesus for those who have not responded to him at all announces their worth before God. There is no such thing as the person who deserves to be taken advantage of. So Paul refused to use the Corinthians the way the pseudo-Christians did.

Examining credentials

Let's move on to this autobiographical section I alluded to earlier. This is a wonderful passage to take note of. There is a string of announcements Paul makes about his own life, most of which don't appear anywhere else in the Bible. Except for just a handful, these events are not recorded in Acts. Verses 21-23:

What anyone else dares to boast about--I am speaking as a fool--I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more.

He begins the argument as if he is going to approach them on their own terms. He is comparing his credentials with theirs, making the same claims they do, to see whose claims are greater, who deserves the grander treatment, and who ought to be listened to more. He asks first, are they Hebrews? This is a language in question; have they retained the language of the Old Testament? Many Jews had not; they spoke Greek, and they had lost their Aramaic and Hebrew. They were unable to read the Old Testament Scriptures in their original language. Paul says he is a Hebrew-speaking Jew. The second question is a national one: Are they members of the nation, the people of God? Paul is. The third question is a spiritual one: Are they Abraham's

descendants; that is, are they heirs of the promises to Abraham? Paul is. Then he asks whether they are servants of Christ. He is even more so; he is a greater servant of Christ.

It is at this point that he turns the tables. The peculiarity of his caricature begins to emerge, and we hear a different sort of music in the background. How does he prove he is more of a servant of Christ? You would expect, at this point, for him to list the crusades he has led, the thousands who have come to Christ at his word. He has been more places, done more things, founded more churches, known more people, hobnobbed with important individuals, etc., etc. But he says none of those things; he says exactly the opposite. Verses 23-33:

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

Of all the things he has done, the time he will brag about is the day he became a "basket case," to use Ray Stedman's joke about this. This was the day he was, in utter embarrassment, lowered out a window, running for his life to keep the people in the church in Damascus from having their lives thrown in turmoil.

Hard work

If they are servants of Christ, Paul is more so. Listen to how this argument unfolds. He says first of all, he has worked much harder. When I think of hard work in the service of Christ, the next thing I think of is the approval of people, a clap on the back, a "job well-done." Those who work hard in the service of Christ deserve to have God do something for them, and they certainly deserve the commendation of their fellows. I can think of many times when I have worked especially hard for the Lord, and I expected (and appreciated) someone here in the church to notice. Maybe not everyone knew, but certain people did, and they really appreciated it.

But the way Paul proves that he has worked hard was by noting how much opposition he'd raised. He had angered the Jews and Gentiles equally. The 40 lashes minus one was a Jewish form of punishment. They used a particularly ugly many-headed whip to scourge people. You will recall that Jesus was scourged before his execution. (They were allowed to flog an individual only 40 times; in fact, the one who did the scourging was subject himself to tremendous punishment if he went over 40, so the rabbis recommended they do it only 39 times just in case they miscounted.) But Paul's preaching challenged not only the arrogance of the Jews; but the might of Rome. The Romans beat with rods. That happened to him three times. Further, he found himself shipwrecked and adrift at sea. In working hard in the name of Christ, he received abuse as the proof that his ministry had been faithful and at depth.

Then he goes on in verse 26 to say he has been constantly on the move. I tend to think of being on the move, traveling in ministry, as, again, including a certain amount of commendation. In the little bit I've done, going overseas at times or other places in this country, such as going to a conference as a Bible teacher, my experience has been that you usually get to stay in the nicest room, sit at the head table, etc. The fact that you're on the move for the Lord's sake, especially if you're going among other Christians, means that you're a celebrity of sorts. You tend to get the best treatment. Well, it was exactly the opposite for Paul. He was on the move so much that he was almost homeless. He was called to go from place to place as an ambassador of

Christ. What did it produce for him? Not celebrity status-it produced danger, danger, and more danger-from his fellow countrymen, from Gentiles, from false brothers, from the sea, from the rivers, from the city, from the country. He didn't travel and find himself taken care of. He found himself threatened.

This is not the sort of argument his enemies would have used. It is not likely to prove how important he is, if human standing is the way you base value for the Lord's sake. His enemies in Corinth would have pointed to the wonderful things people said about them. They in fact brought letters of recommendation. But Paul says everyone thinks he's nuts! They throw him in jail; they're scared of his message and challenged by its reality. That's how he proves he is a servant of the Lord. He's turning this bragging around.

Paul summarizes by saying what he boasts most about is his weakness

In verse 27 he says he has labored and toiled. Now we say that and look forward at the end of a hard day to getting a good night's sleep. But he has often gone without sleep. He has known hunger and thirst. When we're hungry we think of being rewarded afterward with a fine meal. But Paul has often gone without food. And he says he has been cold. If we suffered this way we would expect someone to blanket and clothe us. But Paul was both cold and naked.

Caring for others

Besides all this, he goes on to talk about the pressure of caring for the spiritual life of other people. When he doesn't have anything else hard going wrong with him, he's praying for and agonizing over the loss of faith and fear of temptation of those he loves, even when he's not present with them. It makes his heart burn that they should lose their way or that Christ should not be formed in them. As if all the physical things were not enough, he has agony of heart because he loves his children.

In verse 31 he reminds them that he is not lying in one single point in saying these things; God is his witness. Then he finally summarizes this caricature he has created by saying what he boasts the most about is his weakness.

I had a funny thing happen to me this week. My 14-year-old son Jeff is a freshman at Palo Alto High School. Across the street from the high school is a shopping center, which, along with the local newspaper, sponsored a contest. Jeff was at the shopping center having lunch one day with some friends in a sandwich place. He took one of the contest entry forms and started to fill it out. Now you had to be 18 to enter the contest, so he used my name. His friends were kidding him about the futility of his effort. But he said he was going to win, and it got to be a thing between him and his friends. He was bound and determined he was going to show them, so he took a handfull of entry forms and filled them out (he checked the rules; it was perfectly legal). Then it got to be a debate between groups of friends, and another group said they'd help him, so they were filling out entry forms with my name. It was just a lark among ninth-grade students at Palo Alto High School.

Well, I got a phone call the other day, and the message said please call back about the contest. Now I didn't know anything about it. I called, and they said I had won first prize in this contest-a week's vacation in Mexico. Jeff thought that was the greatest thing, because we had proved to his friends that we could win. My response, on the other hand, was that the Lord must have been pleased with something I'd done lately!

But I was studying this passage this week as all this was unfolding, and it struck me how silly that line of thinking was. Paul said he worked harder and was constantly on the move, and he experienced deprivation; his reward was usually more hardship! The evidence of God's approval is not higher standing or the goods of this earth-none of the things the Corinthian opposition would have pointed to as evidence of the favor of God. For Paul, very often doing the best meant raising the hatred of those who were dug in against Christ and his truth.

Glorying in weakness

In the final analysis, Paul says what he glories in most of all is the time his own weakness was most apparent. In his earliest Christian days he was filled with his own self-importance. He preached in Damascus and caused

trouble because he didn't know what he was doing. He was brilliant in the Scriptures, but weak in wisdom and understanding. He made a fool of himself, and finally they had to get rid of him in order to allow any peace at all to prevail. So to his embarrassment he was let down over the wall in a basket. He says that is the occasion he will boast most of.

Approved by Christ

The point is this: We tend to care too much what the church thinks; we consider the human society we belong to as altogether too important. The fact that "church politics" even exists is an embarrassment. But it does exist, and it names something real, doesn't it? Much jockeying for position takes place, and many things are measured by human approval. What Paul was determined would matter most to him was the approval of Christ. The church was much less important to him than the Lord of the church. He recognized that in his weakness the Lord Jesus Christ was magnified. Every time he was weak and something was accomplished, Jesus got the credit. It was this single-minded devotion to the Lord that made Paul stop caring what others in Christian society thought of him.

Paul's opposition in Corinth was just the opposite: they wanted men to speak well of them, and argued as to who had the greater name among their friends. So Paul says he'll boast like they do, but then, having begun like Mark Antony who said, "I have come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," his boasting is all of his weakness. His boasting unmask his opposition in their foolishness.

Cat Stevens was a popular singer and song writer about 10 years ago. He underwent a religious conversion and dropped out of the popular music industry. He is now Yusef Islam; not Cat Stevens any more. He was quoted in the paper this week. "I was always very religious," he said in an interview several years after his conversion. "I decided on Islam because Christianity takes away a person's responsibility for their own existence and transfers it to Jesus. In Islam there is going to be a final day of judgment for all people, and every human being carries his own record of accounts." Christianity has Jesus at the center of everything. The Christian individual places his life in the hands of the Savior. We magnify the existence of Jesus and de-emphasize our own importance. So Yusef would much rather be a Muslim. He is master of his own fate, and he will become what he becomes by dint of his own efforts. He will carry his own record into the Judgment Day and stand before God.

That scares me more than I can say--the idea of having no savior, none to whom I can turn. Yusef could not be clearer as to the distinction between Islam and Christianity. But having made the distinction, he has made the horrible choice to make himself and what he can become his hope for eternal life. As Paul preaches in this passage, it is true that Christians have centered themselves on Jesus. It is his greatness, not our own; his victory, not ours; his approval before God that becomes ours. He is the basis for our hope. That's why Paul will boast of his weakness. It makes Christ greater.

We tend to value the church more than the Lord. Paul is insisting that we turn that around as we hear the words of his own autobiography.

In conclusion, in Galatians 6:17 Paul declares, "Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." He had scars, welts, a limp, and decreased vision. What he had suffered left scars all over him. Serving the Lord didn't make him fatter, sleeker, or greater, nor call attention to him. But he says, "Let no one cause me trouble." These scars are the brand marks of ownership by Jesus. His willingness to enter the service of our Lord, putting Christ first and himself second, to boast of his weakness, makes him a glorious example of what Christian leadership---indeed, Christian living---should be. I hope his example has been a challenge to you as it has been to me.

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