

THE COSTLINESS OF LOVING CARE

SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS

By Doug Goins

In the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians, chapters 10-13, Paul finds himself in the awkward place of having to justify himself to people whom he won to Christ, his spiritual children. He is having to explain relationships and defend his ministry in that particular church. We saw in the first half of chapter 11 that Corinth was being seduced by interlopers, men whom Paul called “false apostles,” who were good at communication but preaching a false gospel. One of their hallmarks was that of continually boasting about their effectiveness in serving Jesus. Their influence had placed the church in serious danger of losing the fundamentals of the faith, value systems, and beliefs the apostle had taught them, and it is this concern that motivates Paul to produce his own credentials that his opponents can’t match. As is true throughout these last four chapters, Paul is actually embarrassed to defend his friendships and ministry among these people. He does not like to appear to be boasting about human accomplishment.

If you have read much of Paul’s writing you know that he never had any problem boasting or bragging about Jesus. He loved to talk about the life of Jesus, his ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. Paul would have agreed fully with John the Baptist in John 3:30, “He” [Jesus Christ] “must increase but I must decrease.” In 2 Corinthians 10:17-18, Paul himself writes, “BUT HE WHO BOASTS, LET HIM BOAST IN THE LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.” The spiritual immaturity of the Corinthian Christians created circumstances which necessitated Paul’s “boasting” about his experiences in serving the Lord.

In the first half of chapter 11, we considered two aspects of Paul’s loving care for people: his godly jealousy about their spiritual well-being and his generosity. He had lived sacrificially in the material world for the Corinthian Christians. As we look at verses 16-33 of chapter 11, we will consider a third aspect of loving care: the issue of costliness. When you really care about people, it will cost you something.

Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, that I also may boast a little. That which I am speaking, I am not speaking as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. Since many [referring to the false apostles who have seduced the Corinthian Christians] boast according to the flesh, I will boast also (verses 16-18).

The inspired irony of “foolish boasting”

Paul is writing with heavy, inspired irony here. He calls it “foolish boasting.” In 11:1, he began apologetically, “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me.” Keep in mind that Paul is challenging the phony Christian leaders in Corinth who are dominating and intimidating the church. In using irony, it is as if he is sinking to their level, speaking as if he were one of them. He is not denying the inspiration and authority of the words he is writing, but he is saying it’s not what Jesus would do because Jesus was not a braggart. Remember, in 10:1, Paul appealed to these people by the meekness and gentleness of Christ. However, here Paul is convinced that he has to remind the Corinthian

Christians of his loving commitment to them because he wants to protect them from the false apostles. In the second half of 11:17 he makes it very clear that putting any confidence in this kind of self-commendation is foolish and ultimately counter-productive. Paul makes that point even more strongly in the next three verses, 19-21:

For you, being so wise, bear with the foolish gladly. For you bear with anyone if he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face. To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison. [“I am so weak I have never hit anybody in the face. I have never done anything like that.”] But in whatever respect anyone else is bold (I speak in foolishness), I am just as bold myself.

The foolishness Paul is referring to is the boasting of the false teachers. In verse 20 Paul’s irony is in full-force. He says, “You Corinthian Christians have such an admirable tolerance for imposters. They are helping themselves, not the church. They are teaching legalism, contradicting the gospel of grace, and robbing you of freedom in Christ.”

He goes on to say the false apostles are financially exploiting the people. The phony apostles love being treated like great leaders with all the benefits and advantage that go with it. The final mark of their illegitimate leadership was insulting personal attacks on church members. In verse 21, Paul sarcastically says, “Man, I wasn’t charismatic enough to do that! I’m not powerful enough to treat anybody like that!”

Remember in chapter 10 we saw that the Corinthians mistakenly thought that Paul’s meekness toward them was a deficiency in leadership. They thought that he was weak when he really had made a choice out of strength of how he was going to relate to them. What they mistakenly thought was power in the super apostles was actually fleshly arrogance at work.

Now it might be easy for us to dismiss this church as simply being a group of naive people. We might ask, “How can a church allow itself to be duped and browbeaten like that? What kind of wimpy people are going to submit to that kind of overbearing leadership?” I don’t think the Corinthians are all that different from a lot of contemporary churches today. What Paul attacked in Corinth was a man-centered worldliness that was masquerading as spiritual authority. Today you find a “take charge,” strong-arm style of leadership still valued by many Christians. It’s always possible to get a following if the leader will make all the decisions relieving the members from the responsibility of studying, thinking, and seeking the Lord themselves. When the leader makes heavy physical and material demands on the people that creates a sense of sacrifice and if the leader browbeats the people, at least theologically, he can create a big guilt trip. With these three aspects you can easily control people.

Paul refused to lead that way. In 2 Corinthians 1:24 he wrote, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy....” Now at the end of the letter, Paul is willing to summarize his ministry as a servant of Christ for comparison sake. Paul wants to break the spell that these intruders have cast in Corinth. *The Message* paraphrases the second half of verse 21 this way:

Since you admire the egomaniacs of the pulpit so much (remember, this is your old friend, the fool, talking), let me try my hand at it.

Beginning in verse 22 to verse 29, we have a detailed summary of the things these false apostles were bragging about. Paul, very reluctantly, is responding from his own life and ministry beginning with his ancestry in verse 22:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

Paul says these apostles and himself are on equal footing in terms of racial, linguistic, and spiritual heritage as inheritors of the covenant of God. It may come first on the list because that's what the false apostles bragged about most, their Jewish heritage. Paul begins to review his ministry service record in verse 23. Notice in the opening phrase how his comparison changes. He is not just equal to them as he now says,

Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I am more so;...

That's probably better translated, "Do they claim to be servants?" Remember in 11:13-15, Paul made it clear that the false apostles were not servants of Jesus Christ but of Satan.

Since Paul is comparing credentials and service records in which he excels these false apostles, my logic would expect him to prove he is more of a servant of Christ by listing successful adventures and ministry exploits. He ought to list the number of preaching campaigns, the number of converts, the number of churches that he had planted, or the number of nations and continents he had touched with the gospel. You would expect some name dropping of Roman senators he had led to Christ.

This week I heard an hour-long radio interview with a well known Bible teacher and author. I was amazed at the number of times he referred to the large venues in which he was "privileged" to minister. He talked about recently preaching in the largest Baptist church in a big city and being privileged to speak to 13,000 men in a great arena. I was thinking, "Why do I care?" I guess he assumed almost unconsciously that it would give him more creditability to talk about where God had mightily used him."

Paul didn't do that. He turns the tables on his ego-driven opponents by not boasting of success or triumph but in weakness. Paul boasts in the weakness of physical suffering, the weakness of emotional pressure and finally, he tells the story of a humiliating defeat. He begins in verse 23 with physical suffering, the sacrificial love he experienced physically in his body:

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. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned [that means having rocks thrown at you until you are dead]... (verses 23-25a).

All of this is physical violence toward the apostle that came because he chose to follow Jesus. I learned something in the last few weeks that I have never read or seen before. In using this list, Paul is deliberately choosing a literary style that was very familiar to his readers. Great Roman political figures used it in describing their own political and military exploits. They very carefully wrote historical records with full statistical detail to put the leader in the best possible light. Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, wrote in his autobiography entitled *The Acts of Augustus*:

Twice I received triumphal ovations. Three times I received curule triumphs. Twenty times and one did I receive the appellation of imperator.... (1)

Paul uses the same literary style but his list doesn't include triumphs; it includes suffering, defeat, loss, and limitation. His faithfulness in ministry didn't generate accolades but violence and an opposition beyond anything we can fathom today.

Beginning in the middle of verse 25 a different kind of suffering is addressed, the suffering of natural hardships:

...three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. 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; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure (verses 25b-27).

Almost any traveler in that ancient world could have experienced some of those hardships because whether on land or sea, travel was primitive and dangerous. Shipwreck was very common and since there were no life boats or life jackets, the chances of surviving a ship breaking up in the ocean were slim to none. Rivers were dangerous to cross and navigate. Both ocean travel and river travel had pirates to be concerned about. Although Roman troops regularly traveled the Roman highways, robber bands were very common, making land travel also dangerous. Paul experienced every one of these perils because he traveled so extensively.

If we follow Paul's logic in terms of defending himself, his implication is that the super apostles visited very safe places. They took very little risk and rarely moved out of their comfort zones. In contrast, Paul's life always seemed to be on the line. Beyond the natural dangers from the list, Paul was a marked man. There were both Jews and Gentiles wanted to see him dead.

Verse 27 is probably a summary of the personal consequences of how difficult travel was. As I read it, I was embarrassed first, about how modern travel wears me out, and second, about how much I complain about it. "Oh, jet lag is so exhausting! Twenty four hours on an airplane! Indescribably horrible." Paul recalls weariness and pain, having to go without food and drink and sleep and when he crossed mountain passes, sometimes his clothing wasn't adequate and he almost froze to death. I have been all around the world and I don't have a clue about any of these sufferings. I have traveled in relative comfort, safety, and security wherever I have gone.

Although Paul described these difficulties earlier in the letter remember he called them a slight "momentary affliction," not even worth mentioning. He feels foolish now even to bring it up. Paul endured all of this because of love, Christ's love for him, his love for the Lord Jesus, and his love for the people for whom he poured out his life. In 5:14, Paul wrote, "For the love of Christ [ultimately, finally, completely] controls us;..." And that is what compelled him to live the life that he lived.

The physical suffering, however, was not what affected Paul the most. His greatest burden was the internal stress--what he calls his "concern for all the churches"--because he loved and identified with his spiritual children. If there were people struggling with weak faith it bothered him deeply. If people struggled with temptation drawing them away from the Lord, the love of Christ did not allow distance. Paul was deeply concerned about the people he loved. Look at verses 28 and 29.

Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

I've thought about my own responsibility for spiritual care here at PBC. I know how much energy, love, prayer, work, worry, study, waiting, meeting, listening, and talking is involved. This is one congregation with multiple pastors. We have seen how much energy and effort Paul expended in just the Corinthian relationship. They were a difficult congregation. Multiply that times nine, the number of churches Paul planted. He had responsibility for all of those churches, so his

statement about care of the churches is a classic understatement. His mention in verse 29 of those who are weak in faith brings him back to his own credentials addressing the basis on which the Corinthian Christians should trust him as their empathetic shepherd. What Paul has summarized, so far, is suffering love which is very costly. None of the false apostles could match his record of faithful service in the face of opposition, hardship, resistance, or deprivation. However, God's approval of Paul did not mark him as a religious celebrity. He was not better off financially, or popular, or famous. Those were the traits the super apostles would have put on their resumes.

Legitimate boasting - in humiliating weakness

What was Paul willing to boast about? It was not how much he accomplished for Christ or even how much he suffered for Christ. In these last four verses of the chapter, Paul speaks of an incident early in his Christian life when his own weakness ends up being on full, public display. In humiliation, Paul legitimately boasts about his failure in ministry. Look at verses 30-33:

If I have to boast [and the word "have" is actually emphasized], I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

Looking at early church history in Acts 9:19, Luke elaborates on Paul's experience. Remember that Paul was converted on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and take them back to Jerusalem. His name was still Saul as it had not yet been changed. He was a brand new convert, a zealous young rabbi, thoroughly born again and captivated by Christ. The story picks up in the middle of verse 19:

...Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus [these were Christian believers who were already in Damascus who embraced Paul and took him in as a new Christian], and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." And all those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" (Acts 9:19-21)

The people are saying, "Isn't this the man who was killing Christians?" Verse 22 says, "But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ." Paul is a new Christian, who hits the ground running, convinced that his Hebrew scriptures prove that Jesus is the Messiah. In Acts 22, Paul tells us that he was then convinced that he was gifted and called to be the apostle to the Jewish people. Sold out to that vision as a brand new Christian in Damascus, he uses his intellect, passion, youthful zeal, knowledge of the Scriptures, and training as a teaching rabbi to prove that Jesus was the son of God. The same zeal that hunted down Christians for persecution is now focused on the Jewish people who need to know Jesus as Messiah. I realize that Saul predated Moishe Rosen of *Jews for Jesus*. The difference is when Moishe Rosen began his ministry on the streets of San Francisco in the 1960's he had people who responded to Christ as Lord and Savior. When Saul proclaimed and proved Jesus as Messiah, there was not one convert. Nobody was brought to saving faith. And it got worse. Look at Acts 9:23-25:

And when many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, but their plot became known to Saul. And they were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night, and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

Make a note of the fact that he already had disciples. Paul was so powerful and gifted that young Christians wanted to follow him. Then imagine your own disciples having to lower you over the wall in the middle of the night so you can escape. This would certainly add insult to injury.

Ray Stedman talks about that night in *Authentic Christianity*:

What a burning humiliation to this dedicated young Christian! Paul had become--quite literally--a basket case! How confused and puzzled he must have been as all his dreams of conquest in the name of Jesus were brought to this sudden and degrading halt. How humiliating to be let down over the wall in a basket like a common criminal escaping from the reach of the law! How shameful, how discouraging! Once over the wall, he slips off into the darkness of the night, bewildered, humiliated, and thoroughly discouraged. (1)

Paul stated later that it was both the lowest point in his life and the beginning of the greatest discovery he ever made. Thinking about that night, he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:30, "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness." He adds in 12:10, "...for when I am weak, then I am strong." That night in Damascus was the greatest event of Paul's life because God used it to begin an important process which probably lasted ten years of breaking the self-confident, religious pride in this gifted young rabbi. Paul would begin to realize that in his human limitation, in his weakness, Jesus could be glorified. His natural abilities or leadership strengths did not qualify him to be a servant of Jesus Christ. In Philippians 3:4-8 he explains it another way:

...although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

The word Paul uses for "rubbish" here is "common barnyard dung." What he had once regarded as qualifying him to be a success before God and people--his ancestry, orthodoxy, morality, religious activity for God--he now considers as just "manure" in comparison to his depending on Jesus Christ's work in him and through him. Paul's self-sufficiency had been replaced with a tremendous confidence in Christ. Second Corinthians 3:5 declares, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,..."

This morning we asked God to reveal our self-deception and to open our eyes so we can understand and embrace the only basis for confidence in life: strength out of weakness, boasting in what Jesus is and does, not in who we are or what we do for him. This is a hard reality for us because it is so contradictory and paradoxical. If we are honest, we all hope to receive recognition for what we do, to have some kind of influence. We hope to produce a life that will gain some identity or place

in the Christian community. We struggle to accept Jesus' words in Mark 8:35, "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it."

We all want the fullness of the life of Christ to be expressed through us. We want the power of God, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, to be expressed in us. We hope that what we have to offer people will come directly from God.

Paul's words from Philippians 3:8 are an apt prayer:

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

The goal is complete dependency on Jesus Christ to work in us and through us.

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NOTES:

1. Acts of Augustus, *Res Gestae 4*, quoted in *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Paul Barnett. Copyright © 1997 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. Pp. 541-542.
2. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*. Copyright © 1996 Elaine C. Stedman. Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 52.

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