

Paul and the False Apostles



11 I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ²For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one

we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. ⁵Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. ⁶Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. (2 Corinthians 11:1-6, ESV).

Paul begins this chapter with a little foolish “game playing.” He says he played the matchmaker in bringing the Corinthian church to Jesus. He did his best to present them as a suitable virgin, but just like Eve, they had been deceived by another lover who had worked his way in to cheat. He says that’s how he feels when these false teachers come in giving a new complicated twist on the gospel. Also, Paul brings in the idea that these false teachers are probably what we’d think of as the flashy televangelists. You know, the ones who wear gold rolex watches and fly around in the airplanes. He calls them super apostles. I’m not sure about this, but I think it’s what’s going on. Paul is not praising these characters at all. He is sarcastically mocking those itinerant preachers that were coming in behind him undermining his ministry. These “super apostles” were people that came in after Paul who were doing their best to basically denigrate and outrank him.

⁷Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? ⁸I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. ⁹And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. ¹⁰As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. ¹¹And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (2 Corinthians 11:7-11, ESV).

Paul was really bothered by these characters. He reminds the Corinthian church that, unlike those false apostles who took up collection after collection, Paul never even passed a plate. He never asked for a dime from them. Instead, he brought poorer saints from Macedonia who paid for all of his expenses. I think there is a hidden lesson in this example. It is easy in a materialistic society to be impressed by wealth and riches. The same thing goes on today in America where riches and material success get confused or confounded as “blessing” in the

eyes of some believers. Some are sidetracked into being focused on that church with the incredible music program and the ultra modern facilities. That is all okay, but I think there are thousands of small faithful churches dying in the countryside of America that can be revived with faithful people and a renewed vision of the gospel. Just look at what God has done at the Grove. We were down to a handful of people wondering if they would survive as a church. Not knowing what they were to do, they prayed with all of their hearts, and God heard their cries and brought faithful people who were committed to saying, "not under our watch." With God's direction and help, we continue to have a vibrant congregation that sincerely seeks God's will for our community. May we always be a ministry and never become an institution that merely seeks to perpetuate itself.

¹² And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (2 Corinthians 11:12-15, ESV).

Falsehood always has a certain modicum of truth within it. Just think of the sincere believers who sought a move of the Spirit in America in the early to mid 1800's. One man claimed to get a special vision from God brought by an angel, unknown in the Bible, who had a supposed divine message written on golden plates. Only he could interpret those plates. The simple pure Gospel of God coming in the likeness of man, and dying for the sins of the world, was tainted with a long list of add-ons. These included prohibitions of coffee, tea, and other things as well as the need for special garments and initially polygamy. Other than the practice of polygamy, these restrictions might lead to health and clean living, but they cannot be mistaken for the gospel. They simply ARE NOT THE GOSPEL. These are our friends and neighbors who go by the name of Latter Day Saints. They are some of the finest people on earth, but the gospel they promote is not what Paul preached.

Then there was William Miller, a Baptist preacher. His group were called the Millerites who thought that they knew the exact day that Jesus would return (October 22, 1844). Not surprisingly and obviously looking back, they were wrong. It is estimated that 100,000 people met in fields, meadows, church houses, and mountaintops looking to the sky waiting for Jesus. Many had sold their homes and given away all of their possessions. What followed was called the "Great Disappointment." Many lost their faith which resulted in generations of Americans leaving the Christian faith behind. However, several of Miller's followers reinterpreted what had happened and promoted the idea that Jesus had truly come back - but only in the Spirit. They added a series of "to do's" involving moving all worship services to Saturdays, becoming vegetarians, and instituting other dietary restrictions. All of those things may be good for you, but they are not the gospel. They are add-ons. These are our friends who are Seventh Day Adventists.

The list goes on and on, but I'll mention one more. Charles Russell, a former Presbyterian, got fed up with his strict Presbyterian background and he walked from the faith.

In time, he heard Miller, and bought into what Miller was preaching. He then started a Bible study and began studying the Scriptures and systematically rejected one orthodox Bible doctrine after another. He promoted clean living, dressing sharply, and doing active evangelism. Those are all wonderful things but they have nothing to do with the gospel. His final directive was determining that the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation were the most faithful of the group known as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

All of these and many others, including Islam, involved the revelations of an "angel." I would add, an "angel of light." Listen closely to Paul's warnings about such revelations. *"⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."* (Galatians 1:8, ESV).

Vv. 16-33 – If we boast let us boast in Christ – Using questions as a form of argument

Paul's Sufferings as an Apostle

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! (2 Corinthians 11:16-21a, ESV).

Paul now in essence says, "Hey if bragging rights count, let me tell you about what I can brag about."

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Corinthians 11:21b-29, ESV).

I don't think that any of us in this room has ever begun to experience the difficulties that Paul experienced for the Christian faith. I don't need to go through the whole laundry list, but I think it tells us that whatever hardships we must endure will never meet up to the suffering of not only Jesus, but Paul. He says if anyone could boast about what they've been through for

Jesus, it would be Paul. But, he catches himself saying, “but if there is any boasting to be done, it is in my own weakness.”

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. (2 Corinthians 11:30-33, ESV).

He then reminds the Corinthians of what we read about in the book of Acts.

Saul Escapes from Damascus

²³ When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:23-25, ESV).

Let’s now move into chapter 12

Paul's Visions and His Thorn

12 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:1-10, ESV).

Paul throws out a teaser here talking about an unnamed “man” who had visited the third heaven who had bragging rights. This is no mystery man but Paul himself. He reveals such in this passage. This concept of a third heaven was not new to Christianity. Rather, it was a well developed concept in first century Jewish writings. We see this in the Apocalypse of Moses and

in the Book of 2 Enoch, verse 8. There was the belief that there were either 3, 5, or ten levels of heaven. The three levels of which Paul spoke were the following:

- 1 The First Heaven (atmosphere where birds fly)
- 2 The Second Heaven (the visible sun, moon, planets, and stars)
- 3 The Third Heaven (the spiritual realm of God, the angels, and the righteous dead)

Whatever Paul experienced, it was supernatural and he either didn't have the vocabulary to describe it or he was prohibited from talking about it. He says that he doesn't mention it often because he doesn't want anyone to think more highly of him because of it. Paul wanted the Corinthian church to know about it, but not to think too highly of him because of it.

On a personal note, I feel much the same way. Many of you have not heard of my corroborated unmistakeable sighting of an angel on the day of my father's death. It happened across from Vista Hills on my dad's ranch. I was with Sandy and Kat when we saw the angel and there was absolutely no mistaking what we saw. This was prior to my being called as a pastor, so I can only think that God knew that I needed some further assurance of the spiritual realm. I saw what I saw, and if I were put on the stand as a sworn witness in a courtroom, my story would not be altered or varied one bit.

In receiving such an intense spiritual experience, Paul could speak with a certain authority and assuredness to the Corinthians. He could not be out-experienced or out ranked by these false teachers who were coming in behind him, trying to undermine his ministry. Paul adds that God have him a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. None of us know what that thorn in the flesh was. We don't know if it was a physical ailment. We don't know if it was mental temptation. We don't know if it was problematic congregants. But whatever it was, He prayed three times for it to be removed, and God chose to leave him with it. I think instead of us trying to figure out what it was, let's all realize that we too have thorns in the flesh. We have that "thing" that we can't seem to get rid of that keeps us wholly dependent on God.

Let's end here this morning with a couple of thoughts:

- 1 Let's always be on the lookout for that teaching that doesn't line up with the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ. Make sure that there are no add-ons.
- 2 God may do many great things through us. We may be able to endure many hardships that seem impressive, but it is always because HIS GRACE IS SUFFICIENT. Let us never boast about these things but let us always give the glory to whom it belongs - Jesus.
- 3 God may give you the most amazing spiritual experience. Be willing to share it, but be careful how you do so. Paul saw heaven and he didn't have the ability to even describe it.

Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Neese- Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.