

2 Corinthians 11 Commentary-Wayne Barber

PREVIOUS

NEXT

Sermon Index to 2 Corinthians 11

- [2 Corinthians 11:1-3 The Heart of a True Teacher – Part 1](#)
- [2 Corinthians 11:4-6 The Heart of a True Teacher – Part 2](#)
- [2 Corinthians 11:12-15 The Bad and the Ugly](#)
- [2 Corinthians 11:16-29 The Pain of Persecution](#)
- [2 Corinthians 11:29-12:9 The Prize Hidden in Weakness](#)

2 Corinthians 11:1-3 The Heart of a True Teacher – Part 1

Today we start a brand new chapter. Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 11. You know, I told you that I was going to call it “Poise in the Face of Persecution” and would be the theme for the whole rest of the book. Well, I changed my mind. I’m not real good with titles but when I got into chapter 11, I realized that he’s going to now take us into a real intense study on the “Danger of Spiritual Deception.” And so I want to title this next series that we’re facing here in 2 Corinthians “The Danger of Spiritual Deception.” And today what I want to talk about is “The Heart of a True Teacher.” We’re going to go through verse 3. I’ve tried to get to verse 6 and I can’t do it.

You’re going to wonder why I’m only going to get to one point until I finish the message. Then you’ll realize I couldn’t have gone any further. Let me get you into this. The heart of a true teacher of the Word is a precious thing to observe, and we’re going to see this in verses 1-12 before he actually gets into the aspects of false teachers and false apostles he talks about the aspects of his own life: a true teacher, a true apostle. We’re going to see this lived out in Paul’s life. A true teacher will preach and teach whether it be in the pulpit or wherever, a true teacher will preach and teach God’s Word at any expense to himself for the spiritual health of the body of Christ that he loves.

You see, the greatest enemy to God’s people is doctrinal deception. I think maybe I want to say that again. The greatest enemy to God’s people is doctrinal deception. Doctrine is so, so important. You see, once error gets into a person’s mind then it becomes a stronghold that controls his behavior. This is what happened when we studied Galatians, remember? How they turned from living under the freedom of grace, under the bondage to the Law and Paul wrote to them, “O foolish Galatians,” and what happened was it divided the whole church. There were factions everywhere. Why? Because of the change in their belief system; they began to think differently and they began to act differently.

This was what was going on when Paul warned the Colossians and they were facing the Gnostic heresy and he was saying, “People, please, Jesus is the treasure house of knowledge.” All the beautiful things he says in Colossians. Christ in you is the hope of glory. This is what was going on with the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians they didn’t know what happened to the body when it died. They understood the spirit went to be with the Lord. What happened to the body? And they were grieved over this. It was causing a lot of concern in the church and Paul had to write correcting that. In 2 Thessalonians they thought the day of the Lord had come, of all things. And so Paul had to straighten it out because believing wrongly had changed their behavior. This was the warning Paul gave to the church at Ephesus when he met with the Ephesian elders on the island of Miletus and he says, “As soon as I’m gone, woes are going to rise up among you.” And he’s talking about the false teachers and how they’re going to pervert thinking and therefore the behavior of the church.

This was what was threatening the church of Corinth. And so the stronghold of thinking is so important. That’s why truth, God’s Word, has to be preached and has to be taught. God’s Word is truth and when truth is preached it sets a person free; but false doctrine will cripple his life and put him into a bondage that is very hard, if it even can be broken. It cannot be broken outside of the Word of God.

Sin, no matter what shape or form that it takes, stems from a lie that a person has believed. And as we enter into chapter 11 we see the heart of our true teacher, the apostle Paul. He’s going to unveil himself before the church of Corinth. Paul begins by saying in verse 1, “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me.” Now that phrase, “I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness” needs to be understood in light of the context. Remember, context always rules. That’s why I do so much review.

We have just seen in chapter 10 how the false apostles in Corinth and their followers walked according to the flesh. Now what does that mean? What is their behavior like? Their whole message was a lie and their lifestyle was all about the flesh and pleasing its needs. As a result there was no spiritual discernment at all. Remember, they looked on the outside; they didn't look on the heart. They had no spiritual assurance whatsoever. They had to somehow assert themselves. They had no spiritual identity. They were so fake and so false that they had to tear Paul down to build themselves up. They commended themselves as apostles who had great credentials, but here's the interesting thing: there was no spiritual life in them. All they taught, all they preached was death to the people. They bragged on the work that others had done as if it was their own. They boasted of themselves instead of boasting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their whole life and their whole ministry was all about them. It wasn't about Jesus.

But the apostle Paul and the way he lived, the way he preached, the way he taught, was astonishingly different in contrast to these false teachers. He boasted in Christ alone. He didn't point to himself; he always pointed to Christ. In fact, even if the people didn't understand the difference, they could see it. They knew there was a difference in the two people, the false apostles and Paul. Paul refrained from commending himself. He said in verse 12, "For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding."

Paul did not dare enter the arena of having to justify himself and his work based on the false standards of the false apostles. He said, "I'm not going there." He did not dare speak of anything except that which God had said to him or that which God had ordered in his life. Do you realize, and we brought it out last time, make sure you understand, Paul had authority as an apostle. We don't have apostles like Paul today. He had authority, not just over the Corinthian church but over all of the Gentile churches.

You see, Peter was given the apostolic authority over the circumcised, Israel, but Paul was given the apostolic authority over all of the Gentile world. In fact, if he were a fake apostle, which he was being accused of by these false apostles, there would be no Corinthian church. The fact that they existed showed that he was who he said he was. And Paul's heart was for the Corinthians, to see them separate themselves from the false teachers and the false doctrine that they were listening to and to grow up spiritually. "Come out of the nursery," he says in his first epistle to them. And he said, "I want you to become a base of mature believers so that from this base we can have a missions outreach to the whole world, the regions beyond you that have never heard the gospel of Christ."

But until they matured they could not become that base. Missions only can flow out of hearts that are living the message they want others to hear. Paul's heart was to see them come away and stand with him for the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul did not boast of himself; he only boasted of Christ. It says in verse 17 and 18, "But he who boasts, let him boast in the Lord. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends." Paul only wanted Christ to commend him and he refused to commend himself.

"Wayne, why are you going through this?" Because you have to understand that about the apostle Paul to understand his statement in 11:1. This is why it's so difficult for him to do what he's about to do. He's about to talk about himself. He doesn't like to do that. He begins with the words, "I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness." The word "wish" is an interesting word. It's the word *ophelon*, and it means a wish, but it's like asking somebody to do something that is hard to do, it's difficult to do. It's like a sigh: "Oh that you would bear with me;" or saying "would that you would bear with me in a little foolishness."

The word "foolishness" is the word *aphrosune*, which means a lack of sense. Paul could hardly bring himself to do what he's about to do. He thinks it's foolish but he sees the need to do it. He's got to show them the comparison of himself and the comparison of the false teachers. It's very distasteful for him to do what he's about to do. And by the way, he does it several times in the next few chapters and every time he does it, he apologizes for it. He doesn't like it because he doesn't want to commend himself. He only wants Christ to commend him. But he's willing to sacrifice his own dignity here. He's willing to suffer embarrassment here to do for the people what will help them, even though he feels uncomfortable in doing it.

I love this: Paul's identity was in Christ, it was not in who he was and it wasn't his title, it wasn't what he did, it was in Christ. That's a good thing for us to remember in the 21st century. My identity is not in being a pastor. My identity is not in my name. My identity is in Jesus Christ and so is yours. So whatever else is just fluff. But what my identity is, and what your identity is, we find it in the Lord. It was said of a great man, "He never remembered his identity until others forgot it." That's the only time it came up. He didn't live having to have people say that to him.

So he humbly asked, "Would you do what I feel foolish in asking of you? Bear with me. Indulge me if you would." "I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me." He knew that they would, but he just felt foolish in asking them. Paul so loved the Corinthian believers. I hope you can see this. He was willing to say hard things to them, he was willing to embarrass himself to say this to them because he wanted to help them come back to truth, that truth might be the stronghold in their mind.

His heart really comes out in verse 2. He says, "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband,

that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.” Now the word “jealous” there is the word *zelos*. It is a Greek word that actually describes a pot of water that is boiling. It’s about to boil over. It’s a lot of zeal in it. It can be a good word; it can be a bad word. If it’s used in the wrong context it can be bad. Here it’s good.

He adds to it, “with a godly jealousy.” There is a godly jealousy. *Zelos*, then in this context, seems to me to desire something for someone that you love so much with a zeal that is intense. That’s a good word to use, “for I betrothed you to one husband.” This is his desire; he’s beginning to frame what his heart is here: “for I betrothed you to one husband.” The word “betrothed” in the phrase is the word *harmozo*. It was used of a father giving his daughter away in marriage. It could be understood in the context of Jewish marriage.

You know, Paul was steeped into the Jewish heritage. He was a Jew and he met Jesus on the Damascus Road. He understood Jewish culture and Jewish thinking. And the idea of us being the bride and Jesus being the Bridegroom is very natural to a person who understands Scripture. In Isaiah 54:5 God said to the prophet Isaiah, “For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth.” Isaiah 62:5, “For as a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you.” That comparison has been made many times in Scripture and so it was natural for Paul to use the metaphor of marriage and to think of the Corinthian church as the bride to the Bridegroom who is the Lord Jesus Christ.

We’re part of that bride, by the way. Paul brings that out in other epistles. So at a Jewish wedding there were two people that were very important. They were called the friends of the bridegroom. Now one of them represented the bridegroom and one of them represented the bride. They had many duties. They acted as liaisons between the two because there was not to be a lot of contact between the two: the bride and the bridegroom. They carried invitations to the guests. But you know what their specific responsibility was? Their specific responsibility was guaranteeing the chastity of the bride so that she would be a pure virgin when she came to meet with her husband and to consummate that marriage.

Now this could be Paul’s thought here and probably is. In the marriage of Jesus Christ and the Corinthian church, the future marriage, Paul is the friend of the bridegroom who is the Lord Jesus Christ. Now it’s his responsibility to guarantee the chastity of the bride, and he’ll do everything he can do to keep the Corinthian church doctrinally pure and morally pure and a fit bride for the bridegroom for that wedding feast. Paul was their spiritual father with a heart to protect their purity as the bride of Christ.

Now the false teachers that came into play here, the false teachers were those adulterers who claimed themselves as apostles, who were out to destroy the purity of the bride of Christ, just like they are today. But Paul knew that even though they knew the Word of God, even enough to deceive the people, there was a difference in Paul. Paul knew the God of the Word. That’s a big difference. They knew enough of the Word to confuse, but Paul knew the God of the Word. Not only did he know the Word of God, he knew the God of the Word. Paul had the upper hand. And that’s why he’s doing what he’s doing here in trying to help the Corinthian church be salvaged from the false doctrine that is invading their territory.

The story is told of a group of people dining out together and in that was a professional actor, sitting next to an older man. And at a certain time they asked the actor to stand up and give a speech. So he chose rather to quote Psalms 23 and he stood up and quoted it with great voice, with great oratory skills, with great professionalism. And when he finished, they all clapped. They had been entertained. He sat down beside the old man and asked the old man, “Would you like to do the same thing?” And he said, “Sure.” He stood up and he finished and when he finished, though his voice had been shaky, less than professional, there was a hush. Nobody clapped when he sat down; just a holy hush. And the actor who was so professional and so good at what he did, looked at the old man and said, “Sir, I know the Psalm, but you definitely know the Shepherd.” That was the difference between Paul and the false teachers at Corinth.

As their spiritual father, as their spiritual shepherd, he cared about the church of Corinth and he wanted their freedom in Christ to remain pure. He wanted them, that day when we all go to the marriage supper of the Lamb, he wanted to be presented, he wanted to present them as a pure virgin and it means that in spiritual terms. It’s a doctrinal purity which means a morally pure life because what you think determines how you live.

Well, that’s a long introduction. That’s why I’ve only gotten to one point today but I think it’s necessary to understand the heartbeat of a true teacher of God’s Word. Why he will not compromise the Word of God. No matter what it cost him, and no matter what people think or like or don’t like, he will not do it. He’ll say the hard things when he needs to. Why? He’s trying to protect the church from spiritual adultery which will lead to that kind of behavior and will be an impure bride when they’re presented to the Bridegroom.

A true teacher wants to protect God’s flock

Now look with me at Paul’s heart, as we’ve seen already, the way it beats. Let’s just look some more now. What makes up a true teacher? What’s the heart of a true teacher? Only one point: A true teacher, and we’ve said it already, wants to protect God’s flock. You see, Jesus kept saying to Peter, “Feed My sheep, feed My sheep, tend My lambs.” As a shepherd, a teacher will do three things

that are very clear.

One of them is that he'll guard the sheep: the shepherd guards the sheep. A shepherd will guide the sheep and the shepherd with graze the sheep. He guards with God's truth, he guides with God's truth of the Word and he grazes with God's truth, which is the Word. Now Paul makes a comparison in verse 3. It's very interesting. He goes back to the Old Testament and he picks out Eve in the Garden of Eden and how she was deceived, seduced, by the devil himself. And he compares that on one side with the Corinthian church being the bride of Christ and the false teachers seeking to deceive them.

He says in verse 3, "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." That's quite a mouthful and it'll take us the rest of the message to work it out. The word "afraid" in the phrase, "I am afraid," is the word phobeo. It means to "become fearful" and it even has the idea of being terrified. I'm terrified. Now, the interesting thing is that it's in the middle voice. A lot of people miss this.

A middle voice in Greek—we don't have a middle voice in English and it needs to be explained—the middle voice has very similar action to it as the active voice. I'm doing something. But it also has a passive meaning with it. It's like a deponent verb. It's like a middle passive verb. But the middle voice always carries that idea. Yes, I'm afraid, but it's because of something. And Paul is saying, "I am afraid for you, I am terrified, but there's a reason I'm terrified, because of what I know is going on in Corinth," as he was even writing that letter. It brought it out.

You see, Paul sees deception as a horrible thing. Now there was a legend—and understand when I say "legend" I mean legend, and it wasn't about Adam's sin and Eve being deceived—but it was a legend that the Jews believed at the time Paul was writing this, and he could have been referring to, I don't know, that said that Satan actually seduced Eve. There was a violation of her, physically, and Cain was the illegitimate child, the illicit child. Now some Jews chose to believe that. Paul didn't believe that. However, if you look at the germ thought of that legend that someone violated an innocent one and as a result of violation there was a birth of illicit behavior, the apostle Paul to me could have been saying, "These deceivers are like rapists, they're like violators and they want to come in on the bride of Christ and they want to infiltrate their minds." They want to impregnate them with wrong thoughts and they want to give birth to the illicit behavior so that the apostle Paul could not present the church as a pure virgin that day to the Bridegroom.

Pretty good thought. In fact, we don't know, that's just a thought that I threw out that was going on at that time. However, it's got a point to it. It's a great illustration of what false doctrine is. Next time you catch yourself listening to it and think it's not bothering you, be real careful. Would you listen to somebody who wanted to violate you? I don't think so. But you see what we do? We just let the world just continue to infiltrate our minds with that which is going to change our paradigm of thinking and as a result is going to change our behavior.

Well, whatever he had in mind, we do know that he's referring to the actual event of what happened in the Garden of Eden, of the fall of mankind in the sin of Adam. And he compares the fact that Eve was deceived by the serpent. Revelation 20:2 describes the serpent as the devil and Satan. It says, "And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." Eve was led astray to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden.

Now her deception so affected Adam that he wasn't deceived, he chose; because God had told him face to face, he chose to sin against God's command which had caused all mankind to be born into sin. Just think about that for a second. What the deception of one human being, the cost of that to the rest that were born after. Eve's deception led Adam to sin and to the fall of all mankind. Romans 5:12 says, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin and so death spread to all men, because all sinned."

The word "deceived" there in verse 3 is the word exapatao, which means to so deceive that it results in the change in one's thinking which is radical and it changes their behavior. That's deception. You have to understand deception, folks. It's not something you play with. It's something you give your life to. In the end times when the antichrist is on this earth, he's going to deceive people and I'm talking about a true deception to where it changes the way you think and the way that you live.

I saw this on film. There was an experiment years ago in a classroom. The instructor got up and brought in an iron that you'd iron clothes with, and in front of people plugged it into a wall socket and then turned the iron on in front of all the people that were there. And he sat it down. Then for the next 30 to 40 minutes he explained how hot an iron can get. He explained what would happen if you put the hot iron against the skin and how it would sizzle and all the different gory things that would happen if you left the iron on the skin. And then at the end of it he called up someone and he said, "Come here, I want to show you something."

The young man walked up, he said, "Roll your sleeves up." And he took the iron, immediately grabbed his arm and stuck it on his arm. Well, the class was horrified that a teacher would do that and the young man screamed in excruciating pain. And then the teacher calmed everybody down and he said, "Now I want to tell you something. That socket is a dead socket. This iron is not hot. This iron is cold." But the young man had been visibly affected. Why? Because of that which he falsely believed.

That's the way deception works, like that. It is so real in your mind that it becomes real in your experience. The devil was so convincing to Eve that he was able to lead her to question God's Word and as a result to disobey God's command. He disguised himself as a serpent. I don't know what a serpent looked like before the fall, I know they crawled after the fall. Somebody said, "What does it look like?" I don't know. I wasn't there. When we get to heaven I'll ask and find out, but I don't know what it looked like. Evidently it was pretty presentable and it talked. I just get a kick out of thinking what it might look like.

But the serpent came to her, and it was the devil disguised as a serpent and talking to her. You see, God had given Adam a specific command. Here's the serpent disguising himself trying to get her away from that which God had said. And a specific command was Genesis 2:16-17, "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.'" Well, the devil deceives Eve and causes her to question God's Word.

Some say that maybe Adam failed to tell her what God had told him, and if it's typical of most men it's probably right. We don't know that for sure, that's just a great way of looking at it. But at any rate, in Genesis 3:1-6, this is what he's referencing. He's comparing now the serpent deceiving Eve with the false teachers deceiving the bride of Christ at Corinth. Look at this, verse 1, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Indeed, has God said, "You shall not eat from any tree of the garden"?' And the woman said to the serpent, 'From the fruit of the tree of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'" "

Now God didn't say anything about touching it. He just said don't eat from it. But that's okay, she's close enough. "And the serpent said to the woman, 'You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" Now there's an aspect of truth to that. When they did they immediately saw what evil was about. They didn't know what it was about before and now they saw each other's nakedness and you know the story goes downhill from there. The devil only tells truth or partial truth when it serves his purpose. "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise," you know the devil only has three parts of a game plan, "she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate," deliberately, under no deception ate. And that was the sin that cast them out of the garden and that was the sin of Adam of which we're all born into when we're born into this world.

So Paul was referring to this as we continue in verse 3. And look at the consequences of a person's deception. Look how far it goes. No man is an island. You don't do anything by yourself. When you sin and I sin it always affects others in some way, shape, or form. The false apostles had deceived the Corinthians to question Paul's apostleship and thus the instructions he had given to them. Do you realize we don't have apostles like Paul today? Paul was writing the New Testament as he pinned these epistles to these churches under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. In our day to question the authority of an apostle, you can't do that because you don't have any. But what it would be like today would be questioning the very Word of God that the prophets and the apostles gave to us.

When we start questioning, "Did God really say that?" "Well, you have to look at it this way." "Well, actually,..." immediately it sets up in your mind that this Book is not your authority and from that point on your behavior is going to fall down and grow decrepit as a result.

Well, the word "craftiness," "he deceived Eve by his craftiness" in verse 3, is the word *panourgia*, which means "to be crafty, cunning, shrewd." A crafty person like the false apostles of Corinth will use any means. You know these false teachers that came in and seduced the minds, they didn't do it overnight. It was a slow thing; it was alluring and a wooing and getting them to listen to them and like them and etc. But its end was to deceive.

The other day we had huddle time. We have that once a month for our staff. For the devotion Terry brought some fishing lures. He said, "Listen, you know what these lures are for? They're deceivers and their purpose is to catch a fish that's too stupid to know the difference." And you know, there were different kinds of lure, there were different colors, different shapes, because you know not every fish is fooled by the same lure. Because everybody has a weakness, it's a little bit different, and you've got to match the hatch with the catch. But you've got to match the two together.

I thought, man, that is exactly what's going on in 2 Corinthians 11. They knew how to get to these people. I guarantee you they knew how to do it. False doctrine is nothing but lures to bait one's fleshly appetite with the goal to trap it, to catch it and to bring death. But its danger is that when false doctrine is believed, here is what we have to look at from chapter 10, it establishes strongholds in one's mind. And those strongholds will determine how a person thinks, how he reacts, how he behaves. That's the danger. The more I listen to the false things of the world and not to the true things of God's Word, the more I become like the world because that's what I'm listening to. That's what's determining how I think. And Paul says, "Can't you see it?"

Remember the context of chapter 10, we talked about strongholds and how it changes the behavior, but the whole key is not the behavior. That's symptomatic; it's where a person is coming from that causes him to behave the way he behaves. So in Corinth the devil, the old serpent himself, disguised himself as an apostle. He didn't come in as a serpent talking to Eve. He came in as an apostle and sought to deceive the believers who would listen.

The fabric of his deceptive garments was made up of luring fleshly characteristics such as professional polish. I guarantee you if he lived today he'd have Power Point, hi-def screen, he'd have all the tools. He'd have everything to wow, to lure the people and disarm them. He had worldly credentials, had all the résumés you needed, impressive résumés, honey-tongued speech, but every bit of it was just to impress the people who were so gullible they didn't know the difference, into believing a lie. He wanted to seduce the bride of Christ and make them impure before the Bridegroom.

They were good at their deception, folks. And many had already bought into it hook, line, and sinker, and the apostle Paul is trying to warn the rest. Verse 3, "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." What a mouthful. The word "minds" here could be several words, but it's the word *noema*, and it refers to the part of the mind that gives us the ability to understand, to perceive, so that your understanding of what the Christian life really is, that your perception of a single-minded devotion to Christ would somehow be led astray. And you don't see it like you used to see it.

The word "simplicity" itself is the Greek word *haplotes*, which means "a single-mindedness." A single focus, not a double-mindedness; deception leads one's understanding away from the simplicity of devotion to Christ. How important this is to all of us. The word "purity" is the word *hagnotes*, and it's the word that means "sincerity" and it has a lot to do with the body and its pure way in which it lives in this world. Do you see how wrong thinking leads a person's whole understanding of excitement about Jesus and focus upon Him and His Word off the track?

Let me ask you this question: how many of you have been there in your Christian walk when you started listening, not paying attention to God's Word and all of a sudden that fervor and that excitement to walk with Him, that joy of waking up every morning and knowing that He's your life, the joy of being in His Word and the revelation He only brings to you when you're there emptied of self wanting to hear Him, and He just pulls you away from to where your Christian life just gets cold and mechanical and it's not real anymore? Anybody besides me been there in your Christian walk? You see what he's saying?

It's incredible if we would just think it out. It's simple. If a person's got a problem, "I don't know about church anymore," well, what in the world led you off the path? Where's that excitement you used to have to share Christ with somebody? Where's that excitement you used to have to get into the Word? What happened to you? And you can easily find out. Something led you astray. Something messed up your understanding that it's the only way to live the Christian life. Jesus, if He's not Lord of all, then He's not Lord at all in your life.

And people just don't get it. They think that's radical. If you want radical, go back and study the Gospels. That's radical. Jesus preached the hard things. They walked away and never would return to hear Him again. You see, Christianity is not this game we play; it's the life that we live. And it's moment by moment. Is it perfection? No! It's predictability; and the more you know when you're wrong, you come back to where you departed. When you shoot across the road and there's no cars coming, you go back to where you departed and you deal with it. That's the Christian life. You always can know when you're out here in left field or right field because Jesus is just not as meaningful to you and His Word not authoritative enough in your life anymore. Something has led you astray.

Well, the word for "devotion" there is not in the Greek text. It's implied. Purity towards, I mean, it's all there; he just adds devotion to help you keep the continuity of thought. You say, "I'm struggling with what you're saying. Put it together for me in simple terms that I can understand it." I'm going to try. I may miss it, but I'm going to try. Let's go back to what I said a moment ago. Someone says, "I don't feel as close to the Lord as I once did." Well, what or who led you astray? What has taken Christ's place that used to satisfy you in your heart?

What has disturbed your devotion only to Christ? Where have you sought satisfaction apart from Him? See, this is where a lot of religions mess up. We're not a religion, we're a relationship, but they think it's all in the church. No, sir, it's in Christ. And you can't ever find it outside of Him. Someone says, "I love the message of grace because now I can do anything I want to and it's okay." Who has led you astray? Grace does not mean the freedom to do as you please. Where in the world does it come from? Grace is the power in Jesus Christ that lives within us to do as we should. Who has led you astray?

Someone says, "I don't have to confess sin. I'm already forgiven." Who has led you astray? First John 1:9 says, "If you confess your sins He's faithful and just to forgive you of all unrighteousness." That's in the present tense, not in the aorist as if that was a salvation verse. But he said to continue to confess, continue to confess. Well, the forgiveness is already there but the key that unlocks the door and lets you experience that forgiveness in your daily walk and be cleansed by His blood is by the willingness to confess it.

“Lord, I agree with You. You told me if I obeyed my flesh I’d be in this mess. You are right and I’m sick of it and I want to repent of it.”

And you know what? God is the greatest psychologist if I can use that carefully. You understand my thinking. Because He knows how much we need to confess sin because He wants to continually remind us of how desperate we are for Him to do in our life what we cannot do. And every time I confess my sin, I agree with Him one more time. Lord, it is depraved, it is sick, and it is getting worse. It’ll lie to a game warden knowing all the truth that it knows.

Well, someone sings, “You are worthy, oh Lord,” and it sounds so good in church and everybody claps. We walk out those doors and all week long we don’t give God the time of day and we don’t give His Word the time of day. Who has led you astray? “I surrender all.” Right. Many of us today have been deceived, haven’t we? We’ve lost the joy of our salvation. Someone asked Vance Havner, “What’s wrong with the church today.” His response: “We’ve lost the wonder of our salvation.”

Is that right? Why? Because we’ve been deceived. Why is it that people would run out of a church that preaches the Word of God? Why would they leave? Because people don’t want to have their thinking changed, which is going to change the way they live. John 3:19-20, “The light has come into the world; people will not come into the light because they don’t want their deeds to be exposed.” “A” is here: oh God, I’m desperate. “B” is here: I want the joy in my life; I want to enjoy you. But in between A and B is a cross, and nobody seems to be willing to tell the people the bad news. It’s good, but it’s bad. You’ve got to die in order to enjoy what’s on the other side.

Who has led us astray? Church is just not fun enough for me anymore. Oh, my friend, you get filled up with Jesus, walk into this church, and joy will fill this place. Fun, entertainment, that’s not the church. Listen, we’ve got some teachers here that I tell you what, if God takes me home to heaven one day, you could put any of them right here in this pulpit. Why? Because they love God and love His Word and they’re just as committed as I am standing right here. You know why? Because we don’t want people to think wrongly because it’s going to end up causing them to live wrongly. That’s what bad doctrine does. It’s a seduction, it’s a violation of a spiritual mindset of an individual and it bursts a wrong lifestyle in the long run.

Where are you today in your devotion only to Christ? Just like it was when you got saved; you had no question about it, you knew. Where has it gone today? A true teacher wants to protect the flock with God’s Word from being deceived no matter what it costs him and no matter what embarrassment he has to go through. He doesn’t want them to be led astray from their single-minded devotion to Christ.

Well, a false teacher is scary. A false teacher doesn’t tell you the whole message at the same time. He eases it in. I’m not preaching from 2 Peter or Genesis 3. There are a lot of things I could have said that I haven’t said. I’m just trying to get us out of 2 Corinthians which is where we are. But a false teacher will come in and put error right beside the truth and you don’t know it because he’s so polished and everybody loves the way he says it rather than listening to what he’s saying. And after awhile he puts a little more error and a little less truth and after awhile a whole lot more error and after awhile it is all error. But there’s spiritual death, not in the sense of eternal spiritual death but a spiritual dying of a congregation when they don’t hear God’s Word. It starves them to death when you don’t give them that.

An old farmer had a mule, and that mule ate oats. And the farmer was buying the oats and finally one day he said, “These oats are getting too high priced.” He looked at the dry oat and said it looked like a piece of sawdust. So he started getting some sawdust and he’d put just a little bit at a time. Several weeks went by. After awhile it was more sawdust than it was oats. And finally one day it was all sawdust. And that mule came in starving to death, ate and ate and ate. “Look, saved me all that money. He’s still doing good.” The mule finished eating, looked at the farmer miserably, and fell over dead.

I can’t forgive my brother? Who’s led you astray? I’ve got some gripes. Who’s led you astray? Why are you behaving like you’re behaving. Something has gotten in here and changed the way you think. And that’s the way it happens. The only solution, verse by verse, word for word, God’s Word will disarm error. It’ll get the sawdust out back to where it’s pure oats. And that’s what salvages the church any day, but particularly in our day.

2 Corinthians 11:4-6

The Heart of a True Teacher – Part 2

Let’s turn to 2 Corinthians 11:4-6 today. I really thought I’d be moving quicker, but there’s just so much here you just don’t want to skim over it. We’re talking about “The Danger of Spiritual Deception,” and this is really the same message as last week, it just continues on. “The Heart of a True Teacher – Part 2.” It’s completing the message we began this past week.

What is the heart of a true teacher in the danger of deception? In the midst of it, what’s the heart of a true teacher when deception is

on every corner? To get you into this, let's talk about some things for a moment. The desire to protect those who are precious to you is a beautiful thing. It's a built-in characteristic in Moms and Dads to protect their children. You've never seen anything like it. My wife is so quiet and so humble unless you mess with me or mess with our kids, and it's amazing how she just comes out of her corner. It's just built in to do that.

You see it even in the animal world. You know, that's what interests me for a lot of reasons. But in the animal world, anybody that knows anything about animals knows that you don't mess with, for instance, a cow moose when they have a young calf. You don't mess with them. Now, they might be a beautiful picture to take out on a field, but you don't mess with one when they've got that calf, because they're going to protect it at all costs. You've read the article several years ago on a university campus in Alaska; they'd been throwing snowballs at a cow moose with her calf all day long. It aggravated her and frustrated her and a man very innocently came over to work out in the gym and without realizing what was going on, got between the cow moose and the calf, and the cow moose trampled him to death. Because what was it doing? It was protecting its calf.

You see, that's just built in. When it refers to a Christian teacher who loves God's Word and wants to protect his flock from false doctrine, pardon the phrase, but "you ain't seen nothin' yet" about that protective ability to do something to protect the flock from false doctrine. God creates within a teacher's heart a desire to do whatever it takes to protect God's sheep from false doctrine. And that desire to protect is God's heart in a teacher loving the people who love His Word.

Now Paul shows us that, in order to protect the flock at Corinth from the false teachers in their midst, he risks embarrassing himself with what he calls foolishness as he begins chapter 11. He says in verse 1, "I wish that you would bear with me in a little foolishness; but indeed you are bearing with me." Now, you can just hear the consternation in Paul's voice because Paul is one who never wanted to commend himself. He had just said in chapter 10 that a person is never approved unless he's commended by God. Men can approve him all they want, but God has to make the approval. God's the One who commends us.

So Paul never tried to commend himself, but wanted only God to commend him. But now he's about to talk about himself and it makes him very uncomfortable. Paul is a teacher who desperately wanted the flock at Corinth to be protected from the false teachers who called themselves apostles and they were teaching all kinds of heresy to that church. His fear was that as Eve was deceived by the craftiness of the serpent, that the believers in Corinth would be deceived by the false teachers. Verse 3, "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ."

Now, we need to understand that statement. A believer's simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ is the secret to enjoying the grace that a believer already has in Christ Jesus. Now, make sure you hear what I'm saying. Once a person receives Christ into his life, he has already at that moment been given every spiritual blessing in him, and we know that from Ephesians 1:3. All of the promises in Scripture are ours in Christ Jesus it says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him, Jesus is our Amen to the glory of God through us."

I want to make a side note here. These are promises, they're not promissory notes. Do you know what I'm talking about: promissory notes? We have been forgiven. I quoted from 1 John 1:9 last week and make sure you understand that verse. It says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." "If we continue to confess" is present tense, "he will forgive us" aorist tense, He's already forgiven us, "and he will continue to cleanse us," present tense again. And what it's saying is that you don't have to make installment payments in order to get the forgiveness. You already have the forgiveness. And if you have the forgiveness you have a sensitivity in your heart toward sin, therefore you will continue to confess. Therefore you will enjoy all the benefits of that forgiveness which is a cleansing to the point that you'll enjoy fellowship with God.

Now that's a promise from God that we already have these things. Whether or not we're enjoying Him, however, hinges on the simplicity and the purity of our devotion to Christ. That word "simplicity," *haplotes*, which means "single mindedness." The word for "purity" is the word that could be translated "sincerity" and compliments the word simplicity. False doctrine and wrong thinking leads a person off of the track from his single minded focus upon Jesus and Christ alone. And when that gets off track you don't begin to experience what you really already have.

As we saw in the book of Joshua; the same principle. The word "led astray" is one Greek word, which is the word *phtheiro*, which means to "violate, to subvert with wrong information." Wrong information is so dangerous because it controls the way you think and the way you make your choices. The word for "mind" as we saw last week is *noema*, and it has to do with one's ability to understand and to perceive what is right.

So what Paul is worried about is that the Corinthian church is going to get off track. It's so simple: when you get saved, the same way you get saved, the same way you walk in it, you can continue to keep your focus upon Jesus, depending upon Him to do what you know you cannot do, but when wrong doctrine gets in here, it sidetracks you like two trains running opposite of each other and one of them gets sidetracked and they hit head on. It brings destructive things in your life.

You see, it doesn't have to be false doctrine. There are a lot of things that can get you off track. Ministry can get you off track. Some people are more in love with ministry than they are with Christ. And what happens is that whatever your cause is, you become judgmental of others because they don't have your cause, because that's become the focus of your life. And as a result of it, you're not walking in the fullness of what God said is yours in Him.

Well, Paul was afraid for the church of Corinth because he knew what was going on there. That's why he was afraid. As a true teacher then we need to look and see what that true teacher of Paul is in the midst of deception that's all around him. What's going on here? What can we see from him that we can glean this morning?

A true teacher cares about who and what the flock listens to

Well, not only does he want to protect the flock from false doctrine, but a true teacher who wants to protect the flock cares about who and what they listen to. Now this is so critical. The false apostles were preaching deceitful things about the Lord Jesus and the problem was not so much that, yes that's bad in itself, but the problem was the people, the believers of Corinth were listening to them. That's the problem. And the more you listen to them; the best way to stop false doctrine is just stop listening to it. That's the best way in the world to do it and focus on what is right.

Look at 11:4, "For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached," and he has someone in mind. Paul preached the One, true Lord Jesus Christ, the only One through whom we might be saved. Now Paul preached Him; the Jesus of the Bible. The Corinthians had heard his message and many of them had received it and were saved; it was the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul uses the word "Jesus" 44 times at least in 1 and 2 Corinthians. And I've just chosen a few to show you the Jesus that he preached: the biblical Jesus.

He preached the Jesus who sets us apart, which is the word "sanctified" or the word "saint" in 1 Corinthians 1:2. He's the Jesus who gives us grace and peace, 1 Corinthians 1:3-4. He's the Jesus who will confirm us to the end as blameless in him, 1 Corinthians 1:8. He's the Jesus in whom we find fellowship in 1 Corinthians 1:9. He's our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification and our redemption in 1 Corinthians 1:30. He's the One in whom we have victory in 1 Corinthians 15:57. He's the One who enables us to love one another in 1 Corinthians 16:24. He's the One who lives His life through us in 2 Corinthians 4:10-11, and He's the One who laid His life down for us in 2 Corinthians 8:9.

He is the Jesus of Scripture. Now that's who Paul preached, that's who they heard, that's who they received. I've read this once or twice since I've been here but it really fits right now. Someone else has talked about this Jesus, this biblical Jesus and he did it in such a beautiful way. He says,

"Jesus is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He is the keeper of creation and the Creator of all. He's the architect of the universe and the manager of all times. He always was, He always is and He always will be. Unmoved, unchanged, undefeated, and never undone. He was bruised and brought healing. He was pierced and eased pain. He was persecuted and brought freedom. He was dead and brought life. He is risen and brings power. He reigns and brings peace. The world can't understand Him, the armies can't defeat Him, the schools can't explain Him, the leaders can't ignore Him, Herod couldn't kill Him, the Pharisees couldn't confuse Him, the people couldn't hold Him, Nero couldn't crush Him, Hitler couldn't silence Him, the new age can't replace Him, and the talk show hosts can't explain Him away.

"He is light, love, longevity, and Lord. He is goodness, kindness, gentleness, and God. He is holy, righteous, mighty, powerful, and pure. His ways are pure; His Word is eternal. His will is unchanging and His mind is on me. He is my Redeemer, He is my Savior. He is my Guide, and He is my Peace. He is my Joy, He is my Comfort, He is my Lord, and He rules my life. I serve Him because His bond is love, His burden is light, and His goal for me is abundant life. I follow Him because He's the wisdom of the wise, the power of the powerful, the ancient of days, the Ruler of rulers, the Leader of leaders, the Overseer of the over comers, and the sovereign Lord of all that was, all that is, and all that is to come.

"And if that seems impressive to you, try this one on for size: His goal is a relationship with me. He'll never leave me, He'll never forsake me. He'll never mislead me, He'll never forget me. He'll never overlook me; He'll never cancel my appointment in His appointment book. When I fall, He lifts me up. When I fail, He forgives. When I'm weak, He is strong. When I'm lost, He is the way. When I'm afraid, He is my courage. When I stumble, He steadies me. When I'm hurt, He heals me. When I'm broken, He mends me. When I'm blind, He leads me. When I'm hungry, He feeds me. When I face trials, He is with me. When I face persecution, He shields me. When I face problems, He comforts me. When I face loss, He provides for me. When I face death, He carries me home.

"He is everything for everybody, everywhere, every time, and every day. He is God. He is faithful. I am His and He is mine. My Father in heaven can whip the father of this world. So if you are wondering why I feel so secure, understand this: He said it and that settles it. God is in control. I'm on His side, and that means all is well with my soul. Every day is a blessing for God is."

Now, this is the Jesus that Paul preached, the biblical Jesus. Paul could have written that because He knew Him intimately and the

people had received Him into their heart. But what's the problem? There were those in Corinth who were deceiving the people, deliberately misrepresenting the Lord Jesus Christ. If you've never studied 1 Corinthians you don't know that. But in 1 Corinthians 12:3 he said some people are saying that Jesus is accursed. You know what that means? Jesus is still under the curse. In other words, He's not God, He's only a mere man. And that was going on right there in Corinth.

And Paul is fearing this because they're listening to it. He says, "For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached." Now the word "another" is the word *allos*—this is an impossibility—which is the word that means "another of exactly the same kind." There is no other Jesus of the same kind. In other words, metaphorically you can say they were preaching another way of salvation. The whole message was foreign to anything that Paul and his team had ever preached. The message of these false teachers brought an entirely different spirit than the Holy Spirit that had come into their lives when they received the biblical Jesus.

It says in verse 4, "For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received." Now that word "different" is *heteros*, which means "another of a totally different kind." It sometimes is translated "another." Here's what it would say then, "or you receive a different spirit of a totally different kind which you have not received." You see, instead of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit of God who brings freedom and light and produces love in our hearts, they received from a false message a different spirit; the spirit of bondage, the spirit of fear, the spirit of being judgmental of everybody else. There's only One Holy Spirit who comes to live in us when we receive the biblical Lord Jesus Christ.

First Corinthians 12:13 says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Ephesians 4:4-5, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one lord, one faith, one baptism. You see, when the biblical Jesus is received, when the gospel is preached, then the Holy Spirit comes to live in them. But it's also the Spirit of Christ. This is the Holy Spirit that He promised in John 14:16-18. Right when He was going back to His Father He said, "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

So, again, the Holy Spirit, the One that comes when we receive Christ effectually, is the Spirit of Christ. He says in Romans 8:9, "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." So the problem here is that they are listening to a different message, a different Jesus, and the result is a different spirit that comes from what they're listening to. These false teachers were preaching a false Jesus and, as a result, a different spirit. Verse 4 again, "For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received," they were listening to the false teachers preach a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different message which brought no life whatsoever.

Well, that's part of verse 4, "For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted." You see a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different message. But here's what was causing Paul to fear. That's going to go on until Jesus comes back. We know the false teachers are everywhere, trying to lure people off the track of following Jesus Christ. What was causing him to fear was that they so easily welcomed these people and they listened to them. They had no discernment whatsoever. They were actually paying attention to what these people were saying. Paul says, "you bear this beautifully." That's the last part of verse 4.

The word "bear" is the Greek word *anechomai*, and it means "to endure something, to admit it by listening to it." You admit it, you endure it. Why? Because you're listening to it. The word "beautifully," "you bear this beautifully," is the word *kalos*, and it means "good, in a good way." In other words, you do well, you listen to these people. It's sort of an ironic idea that he's bringing out here. "How ironic it is;" Paul says, "you won't listen to me and I'm telling you the biblical Jesus, the One and true Holy Spirit and the gospel message, you won't listen to me, but you turn right around and listen to these people and they've got a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different message."

Isn't it ironic how quickly some believers will turn to anything but Jesus? Now, that blows me away. How people can listen to some of the stuff that they're listening to. I was watching "Larry King Live" several months ago and Larry King was talking to this guy, and you would know who he was, a famous person, and he said, "How do you attract so many people on a Sunday morning and on a weekend?" And he said, "Oh, listen, we just tell them what they want to hear. We don't tell them anything that they don't want to hear."

I want to tell you something, folks. If you've ever seen this and seen the crowds that follow that, it'll take you back. It's exactly what Paul is saying right here. Why do you flock to somebody who's not telling you what you need to hear? Why are you flocking to somebody who talks about your self-esteem instead of your identity being found in Christ? You see, here's "A" and here's "B," and in between A and B there's a cross, and nobody seems to want to tell people about the cross.

It's like that friend of mine who said that lady walked up to him and said, "You're preaching the Jesus that wants to hurt us." He said,

“No, no, you misunderstand. He wants to kill you, because until you learn to die to yourself, you’ll never have what you’re looking for in Him.” There’s a cross in between and nobody wants to hear it. And so Paul says, “Why is it that you’ll listen to them and you won’t listen to the biblical Jesus, the One and true Spirit, and the gospel message that comes straight from His Word?”

See, Paul cares about this church. He cares about who they listen to. He cares about what they’re listening to. Why? Because he wanted to protect them from being seduced by false doctrine just like Eve was seduced. Remember he starts the verse 4 with verse 3. He wants to protect the people. A true teacher in the midst of the danger of deceptions all around him wants to protect the flock from false doctrine. And so therefore he cares about what they hear and listen to and who they listen to. He cares about that.

A true teacher has an intimate knowledge of the Jesus that he preaches

But then thirdly, a true teacher has an intimate knowledge of the Jesus that he preaches. Look at verse 5: “For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles.” “For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles.” Now, I want you to know straight out that Paul has no respect for these false apostles. None whatsoever. When he uses the term “eminent apostles” he uses it more of a tongue in cheek kind of way.

The false apostles were proud and arrogant and Paul was not impressed at all. The word “eminent” comes from two words; the word *hyper*, which means “above,” and *phaino*, which means “to shine, to shine over and above.” But it’s a term used, and particularly in this context, to describe outright arrogance and pride. That’s what it’s used for here. When added to the word “apostles” it just serves to point to the cocky, self-centered people who call themselves apostles. When Paul compared himself with them, there was no comparison. That’s what he’s telling them.

The word “consider,” from the phrase “when I consider,” the word is *logizomai*, which means “to put all the facts together.” Paul says, “When I put all the facts that you’re telling me about these people, and what I know about them, and I put them over here and then you put the other facts over here and you draw a line and you sum it up, man, they don’t even show up on the scale. I’m not going to compare myself with them. That’s pitiful.” The phrase “not in the least inferior” is the word *hustereo*, and it means literally “the last.” In other words, to be the back of the line behind those who are up front.

Well, the translation he has here, “inferior,” is an awesome translation, because that’s exactly what he’s saying. Paul says, “no way am I ever way back here and they’re way up there. There’s no possible way you can make that kind of comparison.” You know why? Many reasons, but he brings out one. And that’s because he knew the Jesus that he preached. He had an intimate knowledge with the Jesus that he preached and they didn’t have a clue.

Verse 6, “But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things.” That’s a powerful verse. The false apostles ran their mouth about the way Paul talked. We saw that back in verse 10 of chapter 10. They said his speech is contemptible. Now, why did they say that? It wasn’t because he was uneducated. It was because he wasn’t polished and the way he spoke was as if he wasn’t educated. Let me explain that.

This is one of the ways they tore him down to build themselves up. “But even if I am unskilled.” That word “unskilled” is the word *idiotēs*, which means “unskilled” but it also can be translated “plain speaking.” Now, does that bring something home to you? The apostle Paul, when you study him you have to see it; the apostle Paul was not a politician. The apostle Paul was not about making people feel good or gaining friends by what he said. The apostle Paul got right to the point. He was plain speaking, whether it hurt them or whether it didn’t hurt them. He had a love in his heart but he told them the tough things. Got right to the point instead of masking everything with clever clichés to keep people from being offended in any way.

So to the polished people, the politicians, the apostles who were trying to gain superiority in the church, that was a sign of being uneducated. But how far off they were. Paul was the most educated man you could find in the New Testament other than Jesus Himself. He could stand on Mars Hill in Athens and stand on the big rock—I’ve been there, stood up on it—and he could stand there and take on the philosophers of Greece and these people were good and he could hold his own. He was a very educated man. Gamaliel had taught him the law, the greatest teacher of the law in all of Jerusalem. This was a man who was extremely intelligent. Peter said of Paul, “Boy, our friend Paul, he writes some tough things that we have to struggle to understand.” And yet, because he was plain-spoken, because he got right to the point, they thought that would be uneducated.

Paul got to the point. He didn’t mess around. He wasn’t trying to gain an audience and he wasn’t trying to get people to like him. He got right to the point. That’s what that word means: plain-spoken. And so these polished politicians, they’re wanting to be apostles and they said he wasn’t even educated.

In verse 6, “But even if I am unskilled in speech in their opinion,” and again, that’s tongue-in-cheek, “yet I am not so in knowledge;” now this is powerful, more than just biblical truth that he knew, Paul had an intimate knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ that he preached. The word for “knowledge” is the word *gnosis*, and the word *gnosis* comes from *ginosko*, which is a deeper and experiential knowledge. It’s something more than a fact that you can take and twist and do whatever you want to do with it. It’s

knowing a person; it's experiencing that which he preached. Paul not only knew what he was talking about, Paul knew Who he was talking about, and he knew Him intimately. But the Corinthian believers knew this. This would really grate on the heart of a person who loves the people that he teaches. They knew he knew God. They knew he walked with Him. They had seen this in his life.

He said, "But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things." And that word "evident" is the word *phaneroo*, which means "plain so that everybody has already seen this; I don't have to tell you something you don't know." "Now, put me beside him," he says. "Listen, they're preaching a different Jesus, a different Spirit, a different message." And I know that's going to be around but he says to the church of Corinth, "My goodness, you know this in me. You know the fact that I'm a true apostle and yet you give them an audience?"

I want to bring it home for us today. Who are you listening to and what are you listening to? I have a hard time reading every book that comes to me. Everybody is giving me books and I so appreciate it, but there just aren't enough hours in the day sometimes to sit down and read every book that comes across my desk. Three people gave me this one particular book and I'll leave the title out. I don't want to fight anybody. I read two pages and I thought, "What in the world is anybody doing reading this book?" And I continually hear it everywhere I go. "Have you read this book?" And I want to go, "Is there any discernment in the body of Christ?" That's the thing that grated on the heart of Paul. Why would you read something that you know is off track?

Well, who and what are you listening to today? You see, the heart of a true teacher, there's deception everywhere on every corner. How does he handle it? Well, he doesn't go fight it but what he does is he tries to stand for truth. And he says he's the one who wants to protect the flock from the false doctrine. He cares about who and what they're listening to, deeply, deeply. And he has an intimate knowledge with the Jesus of whom he preaches.

It may not be polished, but he's plain-spoken and he gets right to the point whether it hurts or not because he loves the people, and only the people that love you will tell you the truth, and even if it hurts. My wife and I were in a meeting once and she leaned over to me, and she's never done this. I was laughing and she said, "Shut your mouth." She's said to be quiet before but she said, "Shut your mouth." I looked at her and she could tell I couldn't understand what she was saying and she said, "There's something green hanging between your two teeth. Shut your mouth."

You know, everybody else saw that hanging from my teeth. Nobody else would tell me. But she loved me and would tell me what I didn't want to hear. And that's what a true teacher will do when there's deception on every corner. He's not a politician; he's not trying to get an audience to like him. He's trying to tell people what will spare them because truth will set them free. Who are you listening to?

Eve was deceived—and maybe I haven't made this point real clear and I want to close with it—Eve was deceived by the devil who was a craftsman at doing that. She was deceived by what appealed to her flesh. Now, think about what I'm saying. Think about it long and hard. What appealed to her flesh is what got her off track and caused the sin really, later on, of Adam which all of us were affected by. She saw the tree, the tree that God said, "Don't you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." She saw first of all that it was good for food. It was the lust of the flesh; it would satisfy the flesh.

Secondly she saw that it was a delight to the eyes: the lust of the eyes. And thirdly, it's desirable to make one wise: the pride of life. Let me just read it for you. I mentioned it last week. Let me read it for you. God warns us about this. And what is it that is deceiving people today? What appeals to their flesh? Why, it makes me feel good and I'm entertained and you just look at churches and how they're trying to present a false picture, good to the eyes. The way they do things are so appealing to the eye and it really makes me wiser than I would have been otherwise.

First John 2:15 "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." If anyone loves and continues to love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever." Not perfection, but predictability. The one who loves the Word of God which contains the will of God, lives forever.

I don't know if you're making the connection or not between A and B, but if you're not single-mindedly focused on Christ, you've already fallen into the same trap the church of Corinth fell into. Something gets us off track. That's why the truth of God's Word is so important in days when deception is on every corner. Truth will set you free. Anything other is a false Jesus, a false spirit and it's a false message. Again I say the problem was not that it was there, the problem was that they were listening to it. What are you listening to? Who are you listening to?

The Bad and the Ugly

“The Danger of Spiritual Deception – Part 3,” “The Bad and the Ugly.” That’s what I want to entitle message. There’s one of those low budget, shoot-‘em-up western movies that came out about 20 some years ago and it was called, “The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly.” For some reason when I was studying this that title just kept coming back in my mind out of nowhere. I think what it was, it was the contrast in the title: “The Good,” and then contrasting with that “The Bad and the Ugly.”

You see, when it comes to people who are supposed to be teaching God’s Word, I’m very sorry to say that in Christianity what some people call it today, we have the good, the bad, and the ugly. We’ve seen the good. We’ve seen the apostle Paul and we’ve looked at his heart and we’ve looked at his humility and what a beautiful thing God has done in his life. But today we’re going to see the other side of the coin: the bad and the ugly.

Contextually Paul, at the risk of inviting some more criticism to himself, chooses to do something interesting. He chooses to use his own life as an example to contrast what’s going on with the false teachers in Corinth. You see, Paul detested ever talking about himself and about his own credentials. This was uncomfortable for him. He told us, and we know this is his heart, that only the people that God commends or approves, it doesn’t matter what man commends or not, it’s who God commends. And so this was very uncomfortable for him. But for the sake of the people of Corinth, the believers, who were being subjected to this false teaching, he crosses the line that he’s drawn for himself and he uses his own life to contrast the dangerous false teachers that are there.

In verse 8-12 we have seen that he’s made a huge decision not to take even a dime from the church of Corinth or any of the churches of Achaia for his livelihood. He’s not going to take any support from them at all. And I want to make sure you understand this. Jesus, as well as Paul, championed the fact that those who teach the Word of God should be taken care of financially. Not as a payment for preaching or teaching, but as support for their livelihood because they spend most of their time in study and in preparation. In fact, Paul even says in Galatians to give them double honor.

But God gave discernment to Paul beyond what Paul could have come up with. Paul discerned in his spirit that the church of Corinth, the rich church of Corinth, had a huge problem when it came to money, and so therefore he chose not to take anything from them. The problem was even made more serious by the false teachers. And by the way, remember the false teachers charged for the people to come and hear them say what they said.

Evidently these false teachers had even accused Paul of robbing the church when it came to this offering for the poor that he was taking up for the poor saints in Jerusalem. He wasn’t just taking it up in Corinth. He was taking it up in many areas. Perhaps this explains as we’ve sort of hinted at and looked at before, why Paul didn’t go and take up the offering himself. He sent Titus and some of the other brethren as a little group to go and take the offering up. All Paul was going to do was come by, pick it up, and take it to Jerusalem.

Well, verse 12 says, “But what I am doing, I will continue to do.” And what he’s saying and referring to here is Paul is going to continue to refuse to take any money from the church of Corinth, and actually, from any of the churches in Achaia. Achaia, remember, is in the southern part of Greece. By doing this, what he’s doing is he’s cutting off the opportunity of his critics. By doing this he keeps the false teachers from using money as a ploy and to criticize him with that. He says in verse 12, “But what I am doing, I will continue to do, that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting.”

And the word “opportunity” grabbed my attention, because it’s not the normal word for “opportunity” or season. It’s the word *aphorme*, and the word means “a rushing to do something, a rushing into something.” If Paul took any money for himself, if he would have chosen to do this from the church of Corinth, these false teachers would have rushed with a vengeance into this, using this as a criticism against him. And he said he wasn’t going to give them that opportunity. These false apostles were opportunists and were looking for anything to make Paul look bad and themselves to look good. This would have played right into their hands had he done this. You see, these people were apostle wannabes. He says, “to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting.”

Well, like I said, Paul represents the good and they represent the bad and the ugly. Let’s look at these bad and ugly false teachers and see some things about them, and you’ll see at the end of the message why we need to be hearing this. It’s not the comfortable passage, but when you’re preaching through a book you don’t skip the next three verses. You have to preach through them. So let’s look at it and see what God wants us to understand.

We need to understand the motive of the false teachers

First of all, we need to understand their motive. Now we’re looking at the bad and the ugly. We’re looking at the false teachers. He says in verse 13, “For such men are false apostles.” Now you have to understand an apostle. An apostle in Paul’s day, we don’t

have them like that today, but only in his day, was a God-appointed man and was in authority over the churches God assigned to him. But the key word to these false apostles is authority, power.

These false teachers wanted to be recognized as apostles. Why? Because they wanted the authority, power, over the churches there. So they set out to deceive the believer through false doctrine and ultimately to steal away their trust in the apostle Paul and what he'd told them. In effect, if we could put it in a summary, they sought to lead the people away from the truth of God's Word. That's what Paul was teaching them and that's what they were actually trying to do.

These false teachers were not simply deceived teachers. Now, we need to understand this. They were intentionally deceptive teachers. They knew good and well what they were doing from day one. Now let me explain the difference in a deceived teacher and a deceptive teacher. You see, one who is simply ignorant or deceived, if he's a true believer—these people were not believers—but if he's a believer and a true believer, as a true teacher, if he's ignorant or deceived about something, he will always welcome correction. He'll welcome it only when it comes from the Word and he may wrestle with it but he'll welcome it. God's Word rules his life.

An example of that is the second pastor of the church of Corinth had to have his doctrine corrected. His name was Apollos. In Acts 18: 24-26, just listen and it'll describe itself. "Now a certain Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately."

So there were some places he didn't fit all together and they helped straighten him out and he became the second pastor of the church of Corinth. So we're not talking about a person who can be deceived in a particular area or ignorant in a particular area, a learner who is willing to change if somebody corrects him in the Word of God. That's a deceived teacher. We're talking about a deceptive teacher.

These deceptive teachers, like I said, knew what they were doing. They were lost as they could be; they didn't know Christ. They intentionally lied to the Corinthians in order to degrade Paul and really to consolidate power within the Corinthian church. They wanted control; they wanted the power. There is no level that a false teacher will not stoop to in order to be in control and we need to learn this. Verse 13 again, "For such men are false apostles." Now the words "false apostles" are one word in the Greek, which is the word pseudoapostolos. It comes from the word pseudo, which means "false," and the word pseudomai, which means "a lie." You see where they're coming from.

The word pseudoapostolos is a word that describes these men. Now these false apostles are sent out to deceive with a false message which will ultimately ruin people's lives. That's their whole assignment. They know what they're doing, they know what they're tearing down, and they know what they're trying to do. Now in contrast, if you put a true Christian, the good, up next to the bad and ugly, a true Christian apostle like Paul was simply one who was sent out by Christ with the message of grace, the message of truth which sets people free. You see the two contrasts here. And we've got to learn to recognize deceptive teachers. We've got to because they're still alive today, they're in churches everywhere. You've got to understand some of these things about them.

We've just come back from Israel, and it's so much on my mind. One of the common threads that wove itself throughout the whole trip for me on this my fifth time to be there was the thread of deception and the thread of idolatry. God's people have been faced with it forever. When we were at Megiddo and we saw the high places that were where the pagan sacrifices were offered, when we were on Mt. Carmel where Elijah challenged the priests of Baal and we saw the high place there where the sacrifices were offered. The same in Laish, which was where the tribe of Dan disobeyed God, they didn't take the property God had given to them and they took this little bitty area called Laish, renamed it Dan. They got sucked into idolatry. We saw the high places there and they lost their whole identity. They're not even mentioned in the book of the Revelation.

The same thing in Jerusalem; you have to understand the Islamic threat that's there. And every so many times a day these minarets are there with loudspeakers and they come on and blare out this false message. It's just constantly in your face everywhere we went that was a common thread. Idolatry and deception and what we've got to understand is that you don't have to go to Israel to see it. Hopefully you have to get outside of the walls of this church, but maybe not. There may be in this church people that are deceivers and you've got to learn that their whole motive is to lie and to teach a message that will only bring ruin in your life.

The lie and the liars are focused wherever they are and they're out to seduce people's minds and lead them away. They want to take control over the lives of people in God's church. So their motive is to deceive, period. They're false apostles; false meaning they're liars, they're deceivers and they have a message, they're sent out with a false message and they're everywhere. That's the first thing I want you to see.

We need to understand the method of the false teachers

But building on top of that is their methods. You see, you've first of all got to realize that they're there. But then we have to understand what their method is. Verse 13, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." You see, these false teachers are deceitful in what they present, but I want you to make sure you understand. They said "deceitful workers" there. They're hard workers at what they do. They're not lazy at all. The word "deceitful" in the phrase "deceitful workers" is the little Greek word *dolios*. It comes from the word *dolos*, which is the really key I want you to look at.

This word, if you'll let it, will draw a picture for you to help you understand what Paul's talking about here. *Dolos* is the word that over the years evolved in Greece to mean "fish bait." Now we don't translate the Scriptures with modern day meanings of the Greek words. That's not what I'm saying. But this particular word begs for your attention. You've got to picture this: fish bait. If you or I were in Greece today and we wanted to go fishing, we go down to the store and we'd buy some deceit: *dolos*. That's the word there: fish bait. When that bait is lowered into the water can't you see it now, that water and here comes this big juicy worm coming down in the water. But you see, on the outside it looks good to that fish that's going to come up and take it. But there's something deceiving about it. On the inside there's a hook. That's what you've got to understand here. What's on the outside is deceptive, but there's a hook on the inside.

When our daughter was wanting to date, I said, "I need to warn you about something. There's going to come a night when the moon is just right, the stars are going to be in your eyes and the stars are going to be in his eyes and he's going to look at you and say, 'I love you.' And I said, don't you dare believe that. You back up about 30 feet and make him describe to you and define for you what he means by love; because he may be on the outside saying what you want to hear, but he may be wanting something you don't want to give. Because underneath that which sounds so good to you has a hook."

You've got to understand this about a false teacher. What they say appeals to the flesh, but there's a hook that you don't see if you're not discerning when you hear it. Welcome to the methods of a false teacher. He'll woo you and wow you and make your flesh feel good, but like I said, underneath there's a hook; there's a price you don't want to pay.

The word for "workers" there, "deceitful workers," they're false teachers, they're false apostles, is the word *ergates*, and it's not a lazy word. It means to toil, to work hard to the point of being weary. That's what it means. You see, while the church of Jesus Christ goes to sleep wanting their flesh to be entertained, these false teachers are busy planting their false message into everything and everyone that's around us. He says, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ."

You see, this message involves a disguise. Not only is the message veiled, but it's a disguise. They come in differently, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. Now some translations translate this "they're transformed themselves as apostles of Christ." That can't be; that's a bad translation. Let me explain why. If you have a Japanese garden and you decide to change it into an Italian garden, all you have done is just change the appearance of what was already a garden. It was a garden before, it's a garden now. It's just a different type. But if you have an Italian garden and suddenly you want to change it into a ballpark, that's a transformation into something that it never was. The word that Paul uses here is not a complete transformation but only a facelift to something that had remained the same. They were rotten to the core, they'd always been rotten to the core, they were deceitful, they were false, they just changed their appearance to make it look as if they were something else.

I don't know if you remember Dr. W.A. Criswell, First Baptist Church of Dallas. Well, he preached at one of the big Southern Baptist Convention meetings years ago and there was a real controversy going on in the Southern Baptists, just like every denomination has faced, about the inerrancy of God's Word, the liberal versus the conservative movements. And he was in the pastor's conference. And if you know anything about Dr. Criswell, you're not going to tell him what he's going to preach on. They said, "Dr. Criswell, you're the first one up. You can be a peacemaker. Don't say anything about the liberals and all that stuff. We know that bothers you, but please don't say anything about them." That's like talking to a wall. Dr. Criswell got up that night, I was there, and it starts off this way, everybody knew where he was going: he said, "A skunk by any other name is still a skunk and it smells just the same." First words that came out. What he was saying was you might change its outward appearance, but it's still a skunk.

That's exactly the word that Paul uses here. He's not using "transformed." They're not something new. They're trying to present themselves as what they really were not, what they had never been. These were deceivers from the get-go. So you've got to keep that in your mind.

Now their ultimate example, they have a great example for all deception, comes in verse 14. "And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." Now, Paul has brought Satan up earlier. He calls him the serpent in 11:3. The "master of disguise," the master of being able to make the flesh feel good while at the same time having that hook within his message. And verse 3 he says, "But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." So now he brings him up again as the master deceiver. And that's the example for these false teachers. They know that he was able to do it with Eve; they're going to be able to do it with God's people that are unaware.

Do you remember when Joshua was deceived by the Gibeonites? Remember they came with old clothes and they came with old wineskins and they said, "We're not from Canaan, we're from another land and we would like for you to covenant with us and to protect us." Joshua did not consult God. How many times have we all got to go back and say, "What was I doing?" And he entered into a covenant with these people that were just a few miles down the road and they were trying to conquer. And as a result of it, being honorable, and any covenant you make before God stands, that he and all of Israel had to suffer for years and years to come.

You see, this is what I'm trying to say. Jesus warns us about these people. Jesus warns us that the adversary, the devil, has his servants everywhere and he's the greatest example of what deception is all about. In Matthew 7:15-20 Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." And Paul's trying to say the same thing. "Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the rotten tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits."

You know, the thought hits me from time to time over the years, will we as a church ever learn? Will we ever learn? These false teachers that Paul warns about are everywhere. And I want to promise you they don't wear a nametag that says, "Hi, I'm a false teacher." They wear a disguise; they don't come on that way. They're out to deceive you by baiting you with a message that appeals to your flesh. But the price tag is that every deceptive teaching has that hook underneath that will bring ruin into your life. It sounds so good; but it brings about ruin.

So what do we know about them so far? What about the bad and the ugly? First of all, their motive is to deceive you. That's what they're out to do. They know that. And they're good at it and they work hard at it. But secondly, their method is by disguise. They don't wear nametags identifying themselves. There's a discernment, and if people don't know God's Word, rarely are they able to discern when they're not hearing it.

We need to understand the master of the false teachers

Thirdly is their master. Who is the one sending out these false apostles with this false message? Well, in verses 14-15 again, "And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds." Now Paul identifies them as servants of Satan himself. Those are the ones doing his bidding on this earth. And now we see the disguise that they wear: a servant of righteousness. That's the way they want you to think about them. So they know all the right words, they know all the right phrases, they know all the buttons to push, and you have to be very careful to make sure you're hearing from God when these people are around.

The word "servant" is the word diakonos, which means just that: to serve. They come on as just that: a servant, a minister. But they're everything but servants of righteousness. They're very dangerous people. In Jude we learn some of the things that these people do. They sneak in quietly, these servants of righteousness. They twist the message of grace, this wonderful, free message of grace that we seek to preach. They twist it and make it a message of license. In other words, you're under grace: you can just do whatever you want to do. Jude 4, "For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long before hand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

"Licentiousness" there is the word that means "license." Listen, I was in a conference down in California and a guy got up and he said, "Listen man, we're under grace; just do whatever you want to do this week. If you don't want to come to the meetings, just stay in your room, get you a good bottle of wine and just enjoy yourself. Man, you're under grace." I thought to myself, "Dear God, that has nothing to do with grace." But these people will take the message of grace, twist it to make it sound right.

I want to make sure you understand: grace is never the license to do as you please; grace is the power to do as you should. It's Christ living in you. As you learn to obey and to walk by faith, it's Christ then doing through you what you couldn't do before. And 2 Peter, he talks about these so called servants of righteousness. He doesn't use those words but it's the same thing Paul is talking about. How they traffic their message. How it is that they slip this message in when people aren't looking. You have to understand that a false teacher knows what he's doing. And he knows that truth to get you interested and then he'll put his error right beside it and then when you're not looking he'll pick up the error and nobody knows the difference.

It says in 2 Peter 2:1, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly"—they don't do this with a nametag and a banner—"introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

And the words “false words” there is the word *plastos*. It’s the word we get “plastic” from, and they’ll emotionally charge your flesh, they’ll get you so emotional you’ll think you’re worshipping and then when your flesh is all charged they will take it just like you do with plastic, you heat it and then you take words that you think you know the definition to but they twist it and make it mean something else and that’s the way they begin to ease that false message into the church of Jesus Christ. These are evil, fleshly-minded, deceivers and they’re out to pervert the message of God’s grace; the message of the gospel.

But remember that what Paul’s dealing with here is not really to show who the false teachers are as much as the scary thing is the believers in Corinth were listening to them. That’s the problem. Not only were they listening to them, they were paying for their upkeep. Now that’s part of the problem right there: When God’s people don’t have the discernment between the two.

Well, let me comfort you. Boy, this is a tough message, I know. I didn’t write 2 Corinthians, and I can’t skip these verses. It is a tough message. But I think it’s one we need to understand. Let me give you some comfort. You can mark these words, write them wherever you want to write them: they will never get away with what they’ve done. In fact, you don’t mess with God’s truth and you don’t mess with God’s people. The last part of verse 15 says, “whose end shall be according to their deeds.”

The word “end” is the word *telos*, which means the final end, judgment. You see, we may never witness their judgment here on this earth. We may see them prosper; we may see them do all kinds of things. Where’s the righteousness of God in all of this? But one day when they stand before Him it will be brought out. At the end, the final end, when they face judgment. Peter said their judgment from long ago is not idle and their destruction is not asleep. Don’t you think for one second they’re going to ever get away with it. They will not get away with it.

The bad and the ugly; their motive is to deceive you and me. Their method is by using disguise. And their master is none other than the devil himself. The bad and the ugly. So I think now that you begin to understand the good, Paul; and the bad and the ugly.

You say, “I appreciate this and know you’re teaching through the book and I understand all that, but this really doesn’t bother me. It’s really not my problem. I’m not going to be deceived and I’m in the Word and I’m okay. So let’s just move on to something else.” Well, before you think that let me read you a little story that was sent to me this week that nails it.

A mouse looked through the crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife open a package. What food this might contain, the mouse wondered. He was devastated to discover it was a mousetrap. Retreating to the farmyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning: there’s a mousetrap in the house. There’s a mousetrap in the house. The chicken clucked and scratched and raised her head and said, “Mr. Mouse, I can tell this is a grave concern to you but it’s of no consequence to me. I cannot be bothered by it.” The mouse turned to the pig and told him, “There’s a mousetrap in the house.” The pig sympathized but said, “I’m so very sorry Mr. Mouse. There’s nothing I can do about it, but pray. Be assured of my prayers.”

The mouse turned to the cow and said, “There’s a mousetrap in the house.” The cow said, “Wow, Mr. Mouse. I’m sorry for you, but it’s no skin off my nose.” So the mouse returned to his house, head down and dejected to face the farmer’s mousetrap alone. That very night a sound was heard throughout the house. Like the sound of a mousetrap catching its prey. The farmer’s wife rushed to see what was caught. In the darkness she did not see that it was a venomous snake whose tail the trap had caught. The snake bit the farmer’s wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital and she returned home with fever. Everyone knows you treat a fever with fresh chicken soup. So the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard for the soup’s main ingredient.

But his wife’s sickness continued. Friends and neighbors came to sit with her around the clock. To feed them, the farmer had to butcher the pig. The farmer’s wife did not get well. In fact, she died. So many people came to her funeral the farmer had the cow slaughtered to provide enough food for all of them. The mouse looked upon it from his crack in the wall with great sadness. He tried to warn them.

So the next time you hear about deception being in the church, remember when one is deceived, we’re all at risk. What affects one ends up affecting us all. It’s all our problem, folks.

There’s the good: there is the good. That’s Paul, that’s the true teacher of God’s Word. We’ve seen his heart, we’ve seen his humility. But there is the bad and there is the ugly, and we cannot walk around as if they’re not there. We need to recognize it and to cut the cancer out of the body so that God’s truth can be the foundation on which we stand: Jesus being the living foundation, His Word being the essence of what holds us up. And that’s verses 12-15. To be honest with you, I wish it was a different passage. Wish we could laugh more and have more fun. But that’s just the way it is: that’s what we need to face. Deception is everywhere.

Let me ask you a question before we close. Who are you listening to? What are you listening to? What are you reading? Have you checked out to see whether or not it’s true and matches with the Word of God? Be real careful. They don’t have a nametag that says, “Hello, I’m a deceiver and I’m out to ruin your life.” They come on as people who make your flesh feel so much better. Look out, look out.

2 Corinthians 11:16-29

The Pain of Persecution

Turn with me, like a broken record, to 2 Corinthians 11. Moving right along, we're taking a lot of verses today. You'll see the current of a river just carry us right on through. I normally don't take this many verses, but it's just so easy; it just flows together. We're going to be talking about "Suffering for the Sake of Christ;" today, "Pain in the Midst of Persecution," the things that Paul had to go through. And we're going to look at some of the things that come as a result of our surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, it's quite a wake-up call when a believer understands that not everyone is really excited that he's living a yielded life to Christ. Have you discovered that? Not everybody gets really excited about the fact that you've chosen to live under the lordship of Christ. There's a lot of pain when it comes to living grace which we call living grace: it's Jesus being Jesus in your life. And when you begin to let His Word and His Spirit control your life, not everybody is pleased. But when you consider the life of the apostle Paul and when you consider the pain that he had to endure for only one reason. You see, he shifted out of religion into a relationship. He came out of a set of rules and trying to obey a set of rules in order to be righteous to where he had to only be righteous by faith. And when he did that he suffered pain that makes our pain pale to non-existent.

It's like we don't have any problems when we're around the apostle Paul. It's like the man that survived the Johnstown Flood. He finally went to heaven one day and he got to heaven and he began to pester Simon Peter. "Simon Peter, I've got to tell everybody about surviving the Johnstown Flood." Simon Peter said, "Okay." But he kept pestering him and finally he said, "Alright, Saturday night, 6:00." So they had a big meeting and the old boy showed up. 600,000 people there. It was a crowd. And he said, "This is going to be awesome." And right before he got up to give his testimony, Simon Peter leaned over and said, "Now you remember, Noah is sitting on the second row."

It's amazing when we talk about our suffering in comparison to the suffering of the apostle Paul. Paul in verse 16 once again resorts to what makes him very uncomfortable. He's going to sound like he's commending himself again and you know that's not what he likes to do. Back in chapter 10 he said the only people that are approved are the ones God commends. You don't go around commending yourself. He hates doing this, but he's identified something for the people and he's doing this for a reason. He's identified the fact that the false teachers in Corinth have a false motive which is to deceive. That's the only reason they're out there. And their method is by disguise. And he's told us last time, "You know, of all things, of being servants of righteousness?" And their mentor and their master is the devil himself.

And so in verse 16 he says, "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." Now the word "foolish" is the word *aphron*. It's an interesting word; it identified the person who has lost touch with his world, with himself. It comes from two words, *a*, without and *phren*, understanding. It's a person that just suddenly is without understanding. Paul is saying that it's possible that someone might think that he's lost touch because of what he's about to do. He's normally not the one to do this, but he's going to do it because he knows they need to hear it. He warns them, "Don't you think now that I've lost my mind."

Verse 17 and 18, "That which I am speaking, I am not speaking as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also." Why is he doing this? Well, the problem is that the Corinthians were listening to and tolerating the false teachers who were taking them for all they were worth. And this has gone to the very heart of the apostle Paul. He says in verse 19, "For you, being so wise, bear with the foolish gladly."

Now the word "tolerate" is the word *anechomai*. We have seen that word back in verse 4 when he said, "You bear with them well." Same word. And what it means is "these false teachers have come to you and you're putting up with them, you're even paying for them and you're tolerating them. And this is causing me to do what I'm having to do. You don't seem to see the difference here of who is and who isn't. You bear with what they have to say. You put up with their behavior." The irony here is that the Corinthians—if you've ever studied 1 Corinthians, especially the first 4 chapters—they prided themselves in being really wise. But yet they were so foolish, unusually foolish, by humoring the fools that were calling themselves apostles and doing it gladly.

First of all, let me show you what the false teachers were doing to them. He tells us in verse 20 the Corinthians submitted to their false teaching which put them right back into bondage. Paul taught the message of grace which sets a person free. Have you noticed, and you'll see it all through the message, that people that love law, they hate grace? There's not mixed emotions here. You either love it or you hate it. You see, a lot of people, flesh drifts toward law. It likes the law. It's a checklist that you can measure, you can do it yourself and so they put them right back. In verse 20, "For you bear with anyone if he enslaves you," because that's what their teaching had done.

Secondly, the false teachers had evidently devoured their finances. He says, "if he devours you." Thirdly, the false teachers had

taken advantage of them. Paul says, “if he takes advantage of you,” which means you don’t even realize you’ve been taken. Fourthly the false teachers had exalted themselves at the Corinthians expense. He says, “if he exalts himself.” Can you imagine the arrogance of these people, and the apostle Paul’s heart, and he says, “You won’t listen to me, but you’ll listen to them.” And finally, the false teachers had insulted the Corinthian believers he says, by harming them physically. Paul says, “if he hits you in the face.”

That word can be translated “slapped.” This is the kind of abusive behavior they had tolerated because they had gotten up under something that would be good, which was the law, and they were right back into bondage. As stupid as it sounds, the Corinthians put up with the false teachers’ immoral and illicit behavior and did so gladly. You know, the only thing I can say is it sounds exactly like the 21st century: Christians that don’t seem to have enough discernment to get in out of the rain.

Paul says, “Wow, we should have been a whole lot tougher on you. If we’d known you would have tolerated that sort of people.” He says in verse 21, “To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison.” “We’ve treated you kindly. We haven’t taken a dime from you. The only thing I’ve told you is that we want to take up an offering for the saints in Jerusalem, and I didn’t even take it up. I sent Titus and some others to be accountable and look what you’re doing.” It’s right here that the apostle Paul puts a different tone in what he’s been saying. This is a man that I think is righteously indignant. That righteous anger has grown up inside of him and he’s responding now to what he sees, not only with the false teachers but with the Corinthians who are so gullible to listen to these people.

He goes on to say, “But in whatever respect anyone else is bold (I speak in foolishness), I am just as bold myself.” And this leads us into the message today, because he’s going to start now doing what’s uncomfortable to him, but he’s going to talk about the pain that has come to him, the suffering that has come to him simply because he’s trying to set people free by preaching the message of grace and preaching Jesus everywhere that he goes. This is not a shotgun approach to hit this one and that one and the other, it’s a rifle aimed at the false teachers who had so misled and made fools of the Corinthian believers.

And he identifies who these false teachers are. And I didn’t write this, and when we mention the Jewish people, you be real careful; I’m not talking about all Jews. I’m talking about the ones who were the legalizers, the ones who believe the law was the way of righteousness. He identifies them as Jewish. He says in verse 22, “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.”

Those are three titles, and when you put all three of them together, you’ve got a pure-blooded Jewish individual. First of all, Hebrew. They spoke Hebrew, but they also spoke Aramaic, not like some of the Jews that had moved into the land and could only speak Greek. They were Israelites, which meant they were born and raised right there in the land. And they were descendants of Abraham. You can’t get any more pure-blooded than that. Which immediately identifies who these culprits were: they were the legalizers that followed Paul everywhere he would go. You can see it in every one of his epistles.

But then he exposes their deceit: what they came on as. He says in verse 23, “Are they servants of Christ?” Are you kidding me? “(I speak as if insane) I more so,” and when he says “more so” he means “more so.” They don’t even show up on a scale when you put the two side by side. And now he begins to unveil what he again feels so uncomfortable in doing but yet feels like it is necessary to help them realize the seriousness of the problem that they’re dealing with. They’re listening to people who have paid no price and they won’t listen to the people who have lived it and have had it honed out in their life and have the message that will set people free.

They’re not listening to this one, but they’re listening to these others. Well, he wants them to know of the suffering that he’s had for the sake of Christ. I want to tell you, it may encourage your life today. You may be in a home and the husband doesn’t believe in the Lord Jesus or doesn’t walk with Him. You may be in a relationship of some other kind and you don’t understand why you have to put up with all the stuff you have to put up with. Well, put yourself next to the apostle Paul and I believe you will be encouraged before the day is over.

The scope of Paul’s suffering

First of all, the scope of Paul’s suffering. Now he starts off very generally. He says in verse 23, “in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.” The word “labors” there is the word *kopos*, and refers to hard work to the point of total exhaustion. It’s not the actual exertion while you’re doing the work; it’s how you feel after you’ve done it. It just caves in on top of you.

We were over in Israel and we were up on Masada. And when we got up there, that’s the last Jewish stronghold after AD 70 when Titus destroyed Jerusalem. There was a group of Jewish people up there that held out. But the Romans wanted no threat whatsoever, and so the people that were up there, after they’d been surrounded for several periods of years really, finally committed suicide. And they did that because they didn’t want to put themselves into slavery to the Romans. They say the Jewish officers are now commissioned on Masada to say that this will never happen again.

But we were up there and having a wonderful time seeing all the things they’ve unearthed and the archeological digs up there. And

we came back to get on the cable car—this thing is several thousand feet up—to go back down to the bottom. And the cable car that had just brought a group up had stuck and it didn't come into position so that the people could get out of the car. And it was hanging right there. They had the police and everybody else out there, the military, trying to get those people off that cable car. It was amazing, dangling that high over nothing. And they got them all off and one of them was in her 90's. And they told us, "Oh, happy day, you're going to have to walk down the back of Masada."

Now we had 70 in our group. Many of the 70 were in their later years. One particular little lady was 83 years old. She was just grinning, and I'm behind her. Here we were going down Masada. This is in the desert. It was hot and the sun was beating down on us. It was probably a couple of miles we had to go down the back of it. I saw her in front of me, and every time I saw her take a step I just straightened up and said, "Buddy, if she can do it, I can do it." But I got down, and when we were going to the bus, all of a sudden it hit me. It wasn't the exertion going down—I wasn't really conscious of that—it was when you stop at the end of the day, when you come to the end of the journey, all of that just settles in on you. And that's that word "labor."

He's not so much talking about what he did; he's talking about the way in which he did it and the weariness that comes from that. Paul says, "in far more labors." Paul was worn out but he was never burned out. You can write that down because the Spirit of God energized him. People think the Christian life is passive; it's not. The Spirit of God energizes us. We're not burn out, but worn out, yes.

He says, "in far more imprisonments." Clement of Rome says in his writings that Paul was imprisoned seven times. We only have record of five of those imprisonments and actually when he wrote this it was before one of these happened. We know that from the book of Acts he was imprisoned in Philippi, we know when he was put in jail in Jerusalem, and actually the soldiers saved his life because they were going to tear him limb from limb. We know when he was imprisoned in Caesarea, that's three times and we know he was imprisoned in Rome twice. But Luke and Acts and Paul in his epistles, they don't go into the seven times, they don't tell about all of them. They were all because of Christ. You have to understand. This is persecution. This is not just suffering; this is suffering for the sake of Christ.

He says, "beaten times without number." That's a great translation of the word *huperballontos*, which means without number; it means to excel beyond. He said, "I can't even count the times I was beaten without number." The word "beaten" is the word *plege*, which refers to blows that strike the body and it can refer to the actual wound itself. In Acts 16:33 he uses this word: "And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds," and that's the word that is used there.

As Paul said in Galatians 6:17, "From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus." I often wonder what the body of Paul would look like: with the scars from having been beaten the number of times that he had been beaten simply because he understood the message of grace and was commissioned of our Lord to preach it into a hostile world, both religious and rebellious. And they put him in jail, they beat him, and all the things that he's had to go through.

He goes on and says, "often in danger of death." The word "often" is the Greek word *pollakis*, which is a numerical term meaning frequency. "I wake up every day with this. This is just like breathing. Every day I face the danger of death." So the scope of Paul's suffering is more in general but it gives us a good picture. It involved being weary to the point of exhaustion, it involved being thrown into jail so many times. It involved being beaten so many times he couldn't count them. And facing death was a constant companion.

You've got to get into this text with me. You've got to hear the pain of the apostle Paul, knowing what he's been through, knowing every day he wakes up and he faces a hostile world and then the Corinthians that he'd given his life to share Christ with were listening to these people who were literally making a fool out of them? That's the pain he's going through. It was a slap in the face.

The specifics of Paul's suffering

But secondly, the specifics of Paul's suffering. Now it gets a little more specific here. He says in verse 24, "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes." Now, neither the book of Acts nor any of the epistles record what Paul says here, but we know it's under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. The seriousness of these beatings is really what needs to be understood. This was a beating that was described in the Jewish Mishnah, which would form the basic part of their Talmud which was their book of instruction.

The maximum strikes that a person could be beaten was 40, because you beat them beyond 40 and it would kill them. And Deuteronomy 25:2-3 defines this: "then it shall be if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall then make him lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of stripes according to his guilt. He may beat him forty times but no more, lest he beat him with many more stripes than these, and your brother be degraded in your eyes." The Jews, not wanting to exceed that 40 limit, because they knew that then they would be in trouble, instead decreased it to 39. And when our Lord was scourged it was not just with the kind of whips they would use. It was a cat-o'-nine tails, and they literally were trying to put Him to death.

So this was how many times that he went through this. Again we see that the very people who were being tolerated by the Corinthians—this is a sad thing—were the very ones beating Paul. And Paul said, "These are the people that caused me to suffer,

and yet you've turned right around and listened rather than understanding the difference of the two." Paul again is specific when he says in verse 25, "Three times I was beaten with rods." Now being beaten with rods is a Roman punishment, and Paul says this happened three times. But Paul was a Roman citizen. See, you have to read into this a little bit. Paul's a Roman citizen, and as a Roman citizen he was exempt from ever being beaten with rods.

Now, it's just like in our times, isn't it? There are a lot of officials today that are supposed to uphold certain things and they just don't seem to get around to it or they turn a blind eye to it. That's exactly what happened to Paul by the Roman officials. In 1 Thessalonians 2:2 he talks about how he was so outrageously treated as a Roman citizen when he was over in Philippi; the officials absolutely said or did anything.

Paul goes on and says, "once I was stoned," and we do have a record of this in connection to Paul's visit to Lystra. This is recorded in Acts 14:5. It says, "And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone him," and the next verse says he escaped. But then you come on down to verse 19 of that same chapter and it says, "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium," that's the places he went to in his first journey, "and having won over the multitudes," notice the emphasis here, "they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead."

And I want you to know, don't point a finger at these Jewish officials and those people who were the legalizers. It goes on in the 21st century in the church. There are people who literally hate the message of grace. They love their flesh. They've done it for years. They have prided themselves on what they've accomplished for God. For three years I was in conference work and training and traveled the world 48 out of 52 weeks. And I would go into places, all denominations, and I've had people get up in the middle of a message when I'm preaching on the fact of the wickedness of the flesh and the sickness of the flesh and the depravity of the flesh, they will get up and stomp out of the church. I've seen it over and over and over again.

People, listen, your flesh loves the law and you see it happening to Paul right here. Make a connection. And every time he would go in preaching Jesus as the only way, Jesus is the light, Jesus is the Messiah, they'd come after him. And he's trying to tell the people in Corinth, "The very ones you're listening to are the very ones who treated me this way." And this stoning; this stoning was a Jewish procedure which was used as a capital sentence that was cast upon an apostate or a blasphemer or an adulterer. And Paul nearly died; it was for death.

Next Paul says, "three times I was shipwrecked." Now, we don't have any record except the ones in Acts 27 and we believe this was written before that, so he's already been shipwrecked three times. We don't know anything about that. As a matter of fact, one of them was so bad he says he recalls "a night and a day I have spent in the deep." Out there in the ocean, probably holding on to the board of a ship that is wrecked for a night and a day. So Paul's recall not only gives us the scope of his suffering but it also gives us some definite specifics.

The stress of Paul's suffering

Thirdly, the stress of Paul's suffering. You know, it's incredible to me to think about a man who woke up in a hostile world every day, never knew who to trust and lived that way every single day of his life, trusting only in the sufficiency of Christ in his life. The stress that would come upon a man like that. He's still human; he's a busy man. God had him going here and there and Paul, remember, made the statement, "I don't build on other people's work," so he's always going in an untouched area, unreached areas.

It says in verse 26, "I have been on frequent journeys." Now what he's going to do here is to catalog the dangers he faced on those journeys; just the simple journeys themselves. What it held for him: the elements of nature that he had to face and also the human factor. He said first of all, "in dangers from rivers." And the word "dangers" is the word *kindunos*, which refers not just to the danger but to the fear or peril one has in anticipating it. He's talking about here the fear that goes in one's mind when the hurricane is climbing up to 5 or whatever it is, and the people, it hasn't hit, but they know it's out there. That's what he's talking about here: the peril, the danger. He said, "the danger of rivers." The rivers of Asia Minor were known to swell and rise without any kind of warning. And they suggest that many times, Paul going into an unreached area, faced those rivers that would swell on him. He had to cross to get to the other side and the danger there.

"Dangers from robbers." Travel in Paul's day, especially through the mountains and wilderness, was a very precarious thing; it was a very dangerous thing. And he knew that. He knew every time he left to go on a journey, something was out there that was very hostile towards him. "Dangers from my countrymen." Paul's own people were one of his biggest threats. And he loved these people; Romans 9 says he loved them with all of his heart; would give up his salvation if they could just understand the message of grace. But he had to face them everywhere he would go. He was like a man who had no country.

The Gentiles were just as bad. He said, "dangers from the Gentiles." Because of the crowd's hostile response to Paul, his preaching, the Gentile officials were quick to react. So it was one working with the other. In Acts 16:20, "and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, 'These men are throwing our city into confusion.'" And then in Acts 19:23, in Ephesus, "And about that time there arose no small disturbance concerning the Way." And that passage leads to where they chased after Paul. It was a riot; it

was totally out of control.

Paul faced peril everywhere he went, whether it was in the country or in the city. He says, “dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea.” And then the false teachers that constantly criticized him and undercut him to try to tear his message down. They were everywhere. That was chapter 10 and 11 of our study. They were always around. He says, “dangers among false brethren.”

On these journeys, facing these dangers, he says in verse 27, “I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” You know what hit me when I was studying this, and it’s probably hitting you about right now. We ought to be ashamed, living in America in the 21st century, for what we complain about. Really, you think with me. Do you realize that right now in other parts of the world there are more Christians that have been persecuted in the last 25 years than there have been in the whole history of Christianity? And you’re just seeing one example of this way back yonder with the apostle Paul.

And you know what? Sometimes the biggest persecution that we have is the air conditioning is not quite right or the preacher preached too long and we were late for our class, or I don’t know if I like this or I don’t know if I like that. It’s just amazing to me how pampered we are in America and how little we even understand about the persecution that is in this world.

Well, the scope of Paul’s suffering is pretty clear. The specifics, he even gets very specific. The stress is what I put in there. Because I know the man facing the peril, the peril is part of it; the fear that’s in his life. Listen, there are no vacancies in the Trinity: Paul wasn’t in it. His application was turned down. Paul was a human being just like you and he, and he struggled just like we struggle. Romans 7, “Who shall deliver me from the body of this death, wretched man that I am.” You’ve got a man that is just like anybody else. He didn’t get anything more or anything less than you and I have. I believe it was Peter that said, “We’ve received the faith just like Paul.” All of us have the same Christ in us.

The sensitivity of Paul’s suffering

The final thing that I have on this one is just the sensitivity of Paul’s suffering. You know the thing that bothered him the most? Not the dangers of the rivers and the beatings, etc., he’s not complaining. But what got to him the most was the spiritual health and condition of not one church but all of the churches. Can you imagine that? It’s enough, the weight, to look over one church and people that care understands it. Yet, so much of this pain that he had—a lot of it was brought on by hateful people—but the most of it was brought on by that deep burden when he saw people like the church of Corinth listening to what they listened to, listened to who they listened to, sending their money to who they were sending their money to. That broke his heart.

Like it was when he talked to the Ephesian elders and he said, “Man, as soon as I leave wolves are going to come in amongst the flock.” It was like the church of Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians: they didn’t know what happened to the body. They weren’t doctrinally sound enough. He was concerned and he wrote that epistle. In 2 Thessalonians they thought they were in the day of the Lord. He said, “Man, you’re not in the day of the Lord. That hasn’t come yet.” But they were concerned; some of them had quit working. He said, “Get back to work.” That hadn’t happened.

You just read through his epistles. The churches of Galatia that bought back into the very same type of thing. You know, this is what weighed on him the heaviest. He says in verse 28, “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches.” That word “pressure” that squeezes on me every day. The word “concern” is the word *merimna*, and it means “that which expresses a deep emotional concern.” You can’t live and ignore this kind of thing. It’s deep in your life. It’s like a parent when they see their child going astray. It’s the heaviness that is on their heart when the child is supposed to be home at 10 and it’s 1:00 in the morning and it’s overwhelming to them. That’s what he’s talking about here.

He was concerned as a pastor-shepherd for the welfare, spiritually, the health, of all the churches. And then he says in verse 29—and you can just see him being so transparent, just this is Paul—he says, “Who is weak without my being weak?” That word “weak” means with no strength whatsoever. He’s at the point of weakening that only God is his answer in this. “Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” Remember he said back in an earlier chapter, “Who can handle it? Some people, the message they receive it and it’s like the light. And other people, they reject it, it’s death to death. Who can handle these things?”

You’re hearing the heart of an apostle here. You’re hearing the heart of a flesh and blood human being like the rest of us. You’re hearing a man who was stopped on the Damascus Road in Acts 9, blinded in his tracks, three days he couldn’t even see. He saw the Lord Jesus Christ; all of his religious efforts went out the window and he spends the rest of his life trying to tell people the law is not the way; the church is not your answer; Christ is your answer. And this is how he suffers. This is how he suffers.

Well, I want you to understand he’s not griping about any of this. You’re going to see in chapter 12 the peace and the rest he had in the grace of God. The grace of God that initiated him and sustained him; it carried him all the way through. You’ll see that in chapter 12. You don’t see it right now. It almost sounds like he’s poor-mouthing; he’s not doing that at all. He’s just trying to get a picture of

what it's like and why they're listening to them and won't even give him the time of day.

That's why he started all this by saying, "I haven't lost touch. Don't think that. I know exactly what's going on." Paul says it may sound like it's that way, but he's sharing this in order to combat the foolish garbage that you're paying attention to and listening to and don't even realize the death that's in it, the bondage that it holds. Paul was a man who had suffered much for the sake of Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:29-12:9

The Prize Hidden in Weakness

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 11. We'll go into chapter 12 today. We're talking about "Suffering for the Sake of Christ," and today we want to talk about the "Prize that is Hidden in Weakness." Now, we talked about the pain of persecution last time, but this time, the prize that is hidden in weakness. In the humanistic world in which we live, the word "weakness" is not an acceptable term.

Now, if you're an athlete or have been an athlete, you understand immediately what I'm about to say. You walk into the locker room. I don't know how many locker rooms I've seen this sign: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. I've heard a coach say many times, "Suck it up, boy. Suck it up. What do you mean you don't feel well? Get up. Are you weak? Run 10 laps, boy, and when you drop down, get up and run five more." You see, we just don't tolerate weakness in the humanistic world in which we live.

But I want to assert to you today, contrary to this thinking, in the Christian world it's only in weakness that a believer has, finally, the opportunity to experience Christ's strength in his life. When we realize we cannot do it, when we can't, that's the only time we're going to realize He really can. He said He would and He can.

After illustrating the pain that Paul had gone through and persecution and then expressing his concern, not for one church but all of the churches, he says in verse 29, "Who is weak without my being weak?" The word "weak" in verse 29 is the word *astheneo*. It sometimes translates "sick," but that is not really the meaning of the word. Maybe a context could couch it that way, but the word is much deeper than that. The word means a person is at his weakness point, he's at the end of himself. Now, whether this be spiritually or emotionally or physically or all three, whatever, it's the place in one's journey where failure to do or failure to be has brought someone, a believer particularly, to the point of desperation.

This weakness could have come from many ways. It could have come from one's failure to try to conquer sin in his life, knowing that victory is not us overcoming sin but victory is Jesus overcoming us. And maybe he's trying to conquer it in his own strength and because of that has fallen back into its grasp and grip, and he's failed. It could have come when God put an unlovable person in his life. I've always marveled at this. I think he parachutes them into my life—"You know what, Wayne? You need this person"—and puts them right in my life. And instead of loving them like we're commanded to do, we try to do things in our flesh; and as a result of that we end up full of bitterness and hatred.

You see, weakness is when one is stripped of any and all reason to take any pride in himself and his own ability. But weakness is the place every believer must go if he is to enter the fullness of what Christ offers to him. For Paul to identify with another's weakness as he does in verse 29, he would have had to have been there himself. For you comfort wherein you have been comforted. In verse 29 he reaches out to those who are weak and can do nothing. And I keep wanting to say this: when we see our weakness, something happens. When we get off of our pedestal and we stop thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, and we begin to see flesh for what it is, and we begin to see the weakness and the frailty of it, that's usually the time that we become very sensitive to the sins of our weak flesh.

And, by the way, this is the prelude to revival: When a person is brought to a desperate end, when a person comes to the point of his weakness, when a person is willing to say, "I can't, God, I cannot do it but You can," and begins to see the sins of his religious flesh and begins to see the sins of his rebellious flesh.

So Paul goes on in verse 29 and says, "Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" We've done something with these apostles sometimes that we should not have done. They're not gods; they struggle just like we struggle. We see Paul struggle in Romans 7 when he puts himself up against the pure, perfect standard of the law. He sees his flesh. That's the best time to see your flesh. And Paul says in Romans 7:24-25, "Wretched man that I am!" And that word "wretched" has that idea of "nobody knows the troubles I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus." That's the word "wretched." He's burdened down.

"Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" It's called the "body of sin" in chapter 6 of Romans. And then he gives the answer. The same One who set him free from its penalty will set him free from its power. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" You see, Paul is deeply concerned with those who are weak. He's been weak. He's deeply concerned for those who have sinned. He's sinned. He knows the weakness and the sickness of his flesh. And it's in the weakened

state of the believer, broken and sensitive to the sinfulness of his flesh, that he finally, finally, can open his eyes and see what Christ really offers to him.

In fact, Paul continues and says in verse 30—and this is powerful, this is so contradictory to what we see in the world today—he says, “If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.” He’s learned the secret, hasn’t he? He’s learned what happens in weakness if we’ll allow it to take place. What a contrast to the arrogant false teachers, these boastful people that were plaguing the church in Corinth.

Paul’s résumé is the résumé of one who, in his weakness, not in his humanistic strength, has come to know the strength and the fullness of Christ. Rather than boast about his strengths, Paul understood now; he boasted about his failures; he boasted about his humiliation; he boasted about his weaknesses; he boasted about his suffering. He had discovered the prize that is hidden in our suffering and the consequent weakness that comes from it, which is to experience Christ.

In verses 31-33 Paul, in utter humility, shares one of the weakest moments of his journey as being an apostle. He had to flee from his enemies in one particular place, and I’m sure the shame was there because he loves to, with integrity, face his enemy. It says in 11:31, “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.” That was a very appropriate thing to say in their culture, because people seem to doubt everything you say so he puts credibility behind it.

He says in verse 32, “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,” how humbling, how humiliating to Paul, “and so escaped his hands.” Do you see him boasting in his humiliation? Let me show you. If you followed him very carefully, hopefully I’ve helped you to do that, he is countering everything that is evidently being said by the false apostles in Corinth. All their deceptive claims with false humility they were evidently speaking about how they had suffered. The apostle Paul countered it in chapter 11. He said, “I bear the marks of Christ. I’m insane thinking about you suffering for Christ.”

And then in chapter 12 that we’ll enter into in just a bit, he counters the false claims that they had which made them look more spiritual, and that was the spiritual revelations that they had. They thought they were really spiritual. If you studied 1 Corinthians, this was a huge problem. In chapters 12 and 14 they thought that anything emotional was spiritual, and if you had these great spiritual experiences in revelation you must really be spiritual. Boy, it sounds like the 21st century, doesn’t it?

But let’s remember something here: as we go through this we’re going to talk about an experience that Paul had as he counters the false teachers. Remember, tucked away, hidden in this is the prize of weakness. It’s going to sneak up on you. It won’t come up until the third point, but in the midst of all that we’re going to be talking about we can find that in our weakness Christ’s strength is made perfect.

The danger of spiritual experience

First of all, the danger of spiritual experience. “What do you mean by the danger? I want to experience Him.” I do too, and there’s nothing wrong with spiritual experience, but there’s a danger in it. Spiritual pride is a dangerous thing and it’s usually bred in some emotional, unusual perhaps, experience that we have in our journey with the Lord. Once a person has this unusual spiritual experience, unusual because he’d never experienced it before, the tendency is to think of himself as being more spiritual.

And I’ve just told you that the whole culture of the Corinthian church was based on that kind of thing. If it was loud, if it was emotional, it must be of God and he must be spiritual. Paul detested bragging about any experience he ever had with the Lord Jesus Christ. He does so very hesitantly because he doesn’t want to do this. He says in 12:1, “Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.”

Now because of the gravity of the problem in Corinth, remember what we’ve been studying, and because of the false teachers’ error that they had been planting in the people’s minds, the apostle Paul feels he must go on and he must counter what they’re saying about these super revelations to show them the falseness of it in the purity of the experience that he’s had with the Lord.

It’s interesting to me: to distance himself from that which he hates to do—he hates to speak of himself, he hates to speak of his experience—he puts this whole situation, this whole illustration we’re about to look at, in the third person as if it’s happening to somebody else. He steps aside and talks about this person as if it’s someone else when it really, in reality, is Paul. Look at verse 2, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.”

Wow, this is really interesting to me. He has not said anything for fourteen years since this incredible event took place in his life. Do you see a contrast to today? If that would be today somebody would have made a denomination out of that experience. “We’re the Third Heavenites,” and on whatever day he had it they’d meet together on that particular day. Like Jesus when He healed somebody put mud in his eye, and one time He spoke and different things, spittle one time. Three denominations broke out of that:

the Muddites, the Spittites, and the Speakites.

We have to talk about our experience, don't we? You see, Paul is going to show you what's much more valid in our Christian walk. "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know." Why did he say that? Why did he leave it so vague? Paul knew that when he shared this experience there were going to be these false teachers that were going to go through it with a fine-tooth comb. And the Greek thought was that the body was totally filthy and bad and could never become anything. And so that's why he had to teach on death back in chapter 5, and in 1 Corinthians 15 he spent a whole chapter talking about the resurrection, bodily, of the body. And he says if you don't believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, you don't even believe the gospel.

So in order to discourage any debate over how the experience happened, he focuses instead on the experience itself. And he says in verse 2, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven." I love that word. He's caught up to the third heaven. The term "caught up" is the word *harpazo*. Guess where it's used? It's also used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 which is used to describe what I believe is the rapture of the church. "Caught up," taken up to heaven.

The term "third heaven" describes in a beautiful way a picture of the "heavenlies." Most of the time you see the word heaven it's in the plural; it's the "heavenlies." When you leave the building today look up. That's the first heaven. There's another heaven that you can't see until the sun goes down, and tonight look up and you're going to see the second heaven: the stars and the moon and all of that.

But the third heaven is a little different. The first two heavens can be seen with the naked eye. But the third heaven has to be seen only by faith because it's there and that's where God dwells. Paul equates this with paradise: heaven with paradise. He says in verses 3-4, "And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak."

Now Jesus Himself equated heaven with Paradise on the cross when the thief cried out to him and Jesus said in Luke 23:43, "And He said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.'" And by the way, there's a huge teaching on this that I almost chased down the road, but I decided that's for another time. So all of you that understand more and more about that term, just rest assured that we'll get to it one of these days.

This is where John was taken up on the island of Patmos and he went up and he was taken up into heaven. He got to see the throne; he got to see the crystal sea; he got to see the brilliance of that place. And he got to put it in writing in the book of the Revelation. Paul was taken up into heaven—now think with me—fourteen years before he penned the letter of 2 Corinthians and had never said a word about it.

Verses 3-4, "And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." He heard "inexpressible words." That's the word that means they were forbidden to ever be uttered after you've heard them. Paul goes on to reiterate that. He says, "which a man is not permitted to speak." Whatever God told him when he was there, whatever revelation came to him while he was there, he was not permitted to share it with anybody else. Even though the experience was worth telling everyone about, Paul was not about to do it.

He says in verse 5, "On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses." Can you imagine if Paul lived in today's time and had a different mentality and took a CD and tried to record all the experiences he had with the Lord? You couldn't put them on a CD. He says in verse 6, "For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me" —I don't want anybody to credit me with more than he sees in me. Listen carefully now—"with more than he sees in me or hears from me."

Paul had plenty to talk about concerning his experiences but he was not about to do that. What was more important to Paul was to be judged on the basis of how he lived and by what he said. "Don't judge me by my spiritual experiences; I'm never going to use that as a crutch to make people think I'm spiritual. No sir, you judge me by how I treat people, you judge me by the way I live. You judge me by whether or not I talk behind people's back, you judge me by what I say." That's the way a man ought to be judged; not by his spiritual experience that he wants to parade and boast about. But how does he live? How does he treat the waitress in a restaurant when you order peas and they bring beans and they're cold? How does he treat the people in traffic? How does he treat the people around him? That determines what a man is, not what experience he says he's had. And to me that's a profound word to people in the 21st century who say, "Oh, I've had all these experiences."

Verse 7, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself!" You see the danger of any spiritual experience, yes, they're wonderful in your journey with the Lord Jesus Christ, but the danger is that you tend to exalt

yourself. I do the same thing; all of us do. And that's the danger that lurks in it. It's like a cancer. It's hidden in the flesh and it's eating away. That's the humility that we could have had if we would have just bowed in the presence of God. It eats that away and it builds that spiritual pride.

We should all desire to be judged by what we are in any given moment and by what we say rather than some illusive spiritual experience we want to boast about. "But, well, I've spoken in tongues. I know where you stand but I've spoken in tongues." So what? "I've been in a healing service and I'm seeing somebody healed." So what? God's not impressed, why are you so impressed? He's impressed when He looks at you and sees Himself. He's impressed with how you live every day. Some of the rudest, meanest people I have ever met are the people boasting about some type of spiritual experience that they've had. It makes me want to turn and run every time I hear somebody talk about it.

I don't care. And the world doesn't care. What they care about is the realness of who we are as we live amongst them. What they care about is when they look at us and see the reality of an experience that took place way back in our life when we got saved and they see a growing, they see a respect, they see a reverence in our life for the awesomeness of the Lordship of Christ. That's what they care about. That experience is just something that is very nice along the journey but it's not what makes us spiritual. Christ is our spirituality.

The discipline of Christian experience

Secondly, the discipline of Christian experience. That's a good word. God knows the danger in any spiritual experience. He leads us in His journey and He'll give us experiences that will just be utopia in our minds. Like the Mount of Transfiguration when Peter, James and John were there. He'll give certain situations in your life, and it's different in different people's lives. But there's a discipline. He's way ahead of us. And He puts this discipline in our life to keep us from doing what some people evidently choose to do.

Verse 7, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" God knows how vulnerable we are when we have these deep spiritual experiences and as I said, He's always faithful. God is faithful all the time. He's always faithful to keep us depending on Him.

Somebody asked me one day, "How do you stay humble?" You have about three hours? God's the One who keeps us humble. God's the One who keeps us in that place that keeps us from exalting ourselves. Paul alludes to the awesome experience when he says, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations." What he's saying here is, "This experience in my life tops anything I've ever experienced except for my salvation on the Damascus Road. For this reason, to keep me from exalting myself."

See, the purpose is very clear why the pain had to come into Paul's life immediately after having this awesome experience with God: "there was given me a thorn in the flesh." This is so interesting to me. The word "thorn" is the word skolops, and it's something pointed. It is something like a stake that you'd drive into the ground. It's something like the point of a fish hook. It's something that brings excruciating pain.

I think it's so wonderful that Paul doesn't tell us what that thorn is. Oh yes, there are a lot of opinions about it. Let me tell you some. Some people think it's a physical ailment, probably an eye because there's a statue they tell me in Italy somewhere that has a drooping eye; and the reason they think that is because of Galatians 4:14-15. Paul says to the Galatians church, remember they met him and he had a physical problem and he describes it. He said in verse 14, "and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." They think that this is what he's talking about. There was a terrible eye disease during that time and it would cause pus to just run out of the eye, and you could lose that eye.

In Galatians 6:11 they use that verse: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." That's a very good argument that that is what his problem was. Something physical that he had to deal with that slowed him down and kept him depending upon God.

Others think that it was a person that was in his life that just didn't let up. I've always told you there's a school for mean people and they train them and send them wherever I pastor. Actually I usually tell that as a school for mean women. But there could be a person. Why do they say that? Because the word "messenger" there, aggelos, is sometimes translated that way: a pastor or person. Remember, there were a lot of people that really gave Paul a hard time. Alexander the coppersmith said, "Watch out for that guy, Buddy, he gave me a hard time." Called him by name.

Others think it was a temptation in his life to a particular sin. Not that he succumbed to it, but he just couldn't seem to get around the corner of it. Remember in Hebrews it says to lay aside the sin that does so easily beset you. And perhaps it was a besetting sin.

Maybe it was his religious fervor that he used to have, trying to do things his own way, and God had to deal with him over and over and over about it.

I don't know what it was, but whatever it was Paul called in a "messenger of Satan to torment me." The word "torment" is the word that means to strike or hit with a fist over and over and over again. Paul was not interested in identifying the thorn. He leaves it wide open; but rather, in showing the purpose of the thorn in his life, he says, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason"—very clear, "to keep me from exalting myself—"there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" He mentions "to keep me from exalting myself" twice. That's his point.

The word "exalting" is the word *huperairo*, and it means to exalt above measure; to think of oneself as more spiritual as others. Why? Because "I had this experience and I really am spiritual." That's exactly what God doesn't want. I hope we're hearing this. People sometimes walk up and say, "Brother Wayne, in my quiet time this morning God spoke to me." Some people think that these types of things make them more spiritual. No, sir! It's Christ that is our spirituality. It's how we live. It's how we allow Him to be who He is in our life and what we say and how we walk.

This thorn, whatever it was—a physical disease, a hateful person, a sinful temptation, whatever it was—kept Paul in a weakened state. It kept him depending upon God and steered him away from pride and arrogance and self-dependency. Paul saw this thorn as the instrument of Satan; but really, you know this, don't you, that Satan is on a leash. He's only got temporary authority. God, when he goes too far, just jerks that chain. He said in the book of Job, "You can do this, this, this, and can't do this—can't kill him. And don't you even think about it." He's on a leash and He conquered him when He came into our life. So really, it was God's discipline even though He used a wicked man, even though He used a terrible way, still God was in control to keep Paul from exalting himself.

Someone once said to a patient who had walked with God and was stricken with a disease in his body, lying in pain and helpless in his bed, he said this and I've never forgotten it: "We are not laid aside to illness. But we're called aside to stillness." It's in those still moments that we see our weakness. It's in those still moments that we realize our desperation. It's in those still moments that God keeps us from exalting ourselves. God keeps us in that humble position of saying yes to Him.

So the danger of spiritual experience is that one thinks that he's more spiritual than other people; exalts himself. The discipline is that God will put something in our lives that keeps us depending upon Him, that keeps us from exalting ourselves. That's the beauty of God's faithfulness.

The desperation of spiritual experience

But then thirdly, the desperation of spiritual experience. Watch this point carefully, because this is where the prize in the midst of weakness sort of appears. The pain of this thorn was so great that Paul cried out to the Lord in anguish. You're talking about desperation. You talk about a man who had been lifted into the third heaven, a man who had been into the heavenlies and had seen what's there, just like John. And then immediately, he's in such anguish that he cries out to God and he says in verse 8, "Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

This is a short verse but there's so much packed into it. Three times he implored, my translation says, "the Lord". The word "implored" there is the word *parakaleo*. It can be translated "came alongside, encouraged, etc.," but this is a different word. In this context it means "to cry out for help." Three times he cried out "Help me, God; help me, God." And what was the obvious answer that God gave back to him? "No," three times no. I can just picture this—and I know this is not sanctified imagination, but it is imagination—"God, this is Paul. This is not anybody else. You know, the greatest missionary in the whole New Testament. The one You took into see You in the heavenlies. You have all power over Satan, God. I'm asking You. I'm asking You as Paul, to take this thorn out of my way. It's getting in my way. I've got things to do and places to go." And God says no. "God, listen." "No." "But..." "No." "But God, I'm your greatest apostle. I'm going to do great things for You." "No." That's interesting, isn't it?

Here comes the prize in the midst of his desperate cry. Right in the midst of it; crying out imploring of God, it says in verse 9, "And He has said to me," if you don't love these words you just need to get right, "My grace is sufficient for you." "What you need is Me. Whatever is over your head, Paul, is under My feet. Experience Me, Paul, experience Me. Don't just talk about Me, don't just sing about Me, don't just pray to Me. Experience Me. Experience My living grace. Experience My divine ability in the midst of your frail human weakness. Cry out to Me, Paul, cry out to Me." "My grace is sufficient for you."

The word "sufficient" there is the word *arkeo*, which is the word which means "that which fully satisfies a person." It's that which enables a person to do whatever is demanded in his life. It's divine ability in the midst of desperate weakness. It is everything one needs to bear up under and to press on in the midst of excruciating difficulty. This sufficient grace found only in Christ is hidden in the midst of suffering and appears only when one realizes his weakness.

Let's get this down to where we live. Manley Beasley who was such a great friend, used to say to me, "Listen, you'll never walk by faith until you're at the point of desperation." Weakness is where God has to get every one of us. He has to get us there His own

way. I don't know what the thorn is that He'll put in our life. I don't know what He'll do to render us weak, but until you get weak you can't have a clue what we're talking about; about Jesus being Jesus in your life.

You see, the biggest problem that most of us have is our strength. We can do, we can it. If we just have this program; if we just have this plan; if we just strategize the right way, we can impress God. We can get the job done. And God said, "I am not in any way impressed. You're not weak enough yet for Me to be able to do what I'm yearning to do in and through your life. My grace is sufficient." I've had people tell me, "I haven't experienced it yet." I know, because you're not weak enough.

I remember one day when I was pastoring and I was the only one left there at the church. That's a bad thing. When somebody has a need and somebody walked in and said, "Can anybody help me? I've got a problem." I said, "Well, I'll try." "Who are you?" "I'm the senior pastor." "That's who I'm looking for." I'm thinking to myself, "I don't think so."

He told me a story that would just make some of the soap operas look bad. It was the worst thing I've ever heard in my life. And he said, "What am I going to do?" And I said, "Well, praise the Lord." "What do you mean 'praise the Lord'?" I said, "Man, for the first time in your life you're at the end of yourself. For the first time in your life you're a candidate to see God do something in your life." "Is there anybody else in here that can help me?"

You think people want to hear that? You wonder why people aren't flooding in the doors. You wonder why people don't come to this message. Because they don't want to hear it. They don't want to go to the cross. They don't want to be weak. They don't want to be desperate. They don't want to have to cry out in anguish and say, "Oh God, help me." And God says, "I'm going to help you, but in a way you never thought about."

There's a prize that is hidden in your weakness. Have you discovered it yet? And the prize is that when you listen to what God is saying, in my weakness, in my weakness His strength is made perfect in my life. You say, "Wayne, there's so much here, you haven't touched it." I know. That's why I'm going to come back to it. We're going to camp out here for while, folks. This is the essence of how we learn the message. And if a person can't see that, there is still too much of them and they haven't realized the prize and they're going to be bitter, they're going to shake their fist in God's face. They haven't bowed yet in their weakness and received the strength that only God can give them in the midst of their circumstance.

The danger of spiritual experience. Boy, there's a big danger. You think of yourself as more spiritual than other people. You say, "I've never done that." Well, I can't identify with you because I have. Look down your nose on people because they don't understand the Word. Look down your nose on people because they haven't studied this. Listen, that has nothing to do with it. It's how you live every day. How do you live every day?

Secondly, the discipline of spiritual experience is a thorn. God is so awesome. He knows our hearts, He knows exactly what our flesh is like, and therefore He heads us off at the pass. But some people misinterpret it. Some people think it's a curse and some people think it's this or that. They have to call it something else. They don't want to look at it as that which God is using to bring them to their place of weakness.

And then there's the desperation of spiritual weakness, when people finally get to the end of themselves. There's no place else to turn. There's no plan B. They've exhausted every other avenue and now what a novel idea: they turn to God and they say, "Oh God, I'm weak, would You be my strength." And that's when they begin to learn what the Christian life is all about. Weakness is a good word. Not a bad word.

I talked about Manly Beasley awhile ago. He's in heaven today. He's one of those guys in his prime, when he was young, healthy, good looking, I don't like people like that. Had that dark hair and just a nice looking guy, big built, muscular. Could get anything done. Became the greatest preacher on faith when he got his first terminal disease. Ended up having 14 different terminal diseases that could have killed him at anytime. God just decided not to let him go yet. He got to where the last three years of his life, if you ever heard Manley, you had to help him to the pulpit, literally help him to the pulpit. And right at the very end he had to sit down. But when he'd get up to the pulpit he'd fall over on the pulpit and everybody would just gasp and think, "Can he make it?" And then he would get into the Word and buddy, when he got into the Word, you're thinking, "Where'd that come from?" In the midst of the man's weakness Christ spoke. This is one man who is changed by the message that he spoke. I'm telling you, he touched people that he'll never know about. He knows it now because he's in heaven.

Manley was asked to go into a hospital room of a lady who had also had a terminal disease and she was suffering deeply and gravely. And they said, "Manley, you're one who could minister to her. You've been there." And so he went into her room and she looked up at him and she said, "Brother Manley, will you pray for me?" If you know anything about brother Manley, he may and he may not. He said, "I don't know if I will, don't know if I won't." He said, "Let me do something first. Tell me about you and Jesus during this time of suffering. I want to hear what He's been doing in your life."

And for about an hour, with tears streaming down her face, said it was the greatest time in her whole entire Christian walk because

in the midst of those dark hours, in the midst of those weak moments, she cried out to her Savior and He was there, just like He said He would be. And He did in her life what she'd never experienced before. And when she finished, Manley said to her, "Are you sure you still want me to pray for your healing?"

We've got it backwards, folks. We're doing everything we can do to stay down here. God's doing everything He can do to get us up there. We've got it so upside down it's incredible. We get all we can, can all we get, sit on the can, and poison the rest. We don't realize God gave us the funds to give to missions and to take care of others. Everything we do is backwards. That's why we can't understand weakness. When you're at the end of yourself, the encouragement this message will be is to somebody who is in this auditorium this morning and you're going through a time that you've never known before and you don't understand it. God says 'You don't have to understand it. You just trust Me. Cry out to Me. You let Me be to you, you let My Word come into your mind and you'll understand it like you've never understood it before if you'll yield to Me.'

You can go one of two ways when you get in this spot. You can turn cold and hard and bitter, or you can turn and yield and experience Him like you've never known Him before. He said, "Paul, there's a prize, there's a prize. In your weakness, My strength is made perfect. Everything you need, I am. Would you like to experience Me, Paul?"

Would you like to experience Him this morning; know Him like you've never known Him before? Just open up to Him, lay every agenda you thought you had down and say, "God, it's all about You."

It's not Him being your co-pilot. You get in the trunk of the car, hand Him the keys, shut the trunk, and say through the little light in the keyhole, 'God, You put any kind of gasoline You want in this car and go anywhere You want to go. I just trust You.' That's what it's all about. Are you there today? It's not a onetime thing because once you get there and you think you're more spiritual God keeps you there. He's always ahead of us.

What's God saying to your life today? What's he saying to you today?