

2 Corinthians 10 & 11

Introduction

People in leadership always face criticism because of (1) opposition to the principles for which they stand, or (2) personal jealousy. We have already seen how true this was in Paul's life. Not only because of hostile Jewish or pagan leaders, but also because of so-called Christians who tried to undermine Paul's work and character, and lead the church astray.

There was one particularly difficult man. He was a real thorn in the side. He led others astray (2 Corinthians 2 & 7). But reconciliation had taken place with the majority, and there was genuine repentance. The matter was closed. But there were still a few troublemakers left. Though they were few, they were a source of concern and difficulty. In society as well as in a church, how much damage a small number can do. They can cause such a waste of time, unnecessary worry and heartbreak. Progress is halted because of so much effort and time being devoted to them.

There was devastating criticism of Paul. He was accused of being a coward who could write weighty letters but not speak boldly to the face. Some said God was not with him because he did not ask for money for his support from their church. Therefore he was not a real apostle. They forgot that Paul maintained himself until the church was established. Then they sank to the level of personal abuse, saying his bodily presence was weak, and his speech contemptible. (Indeed he was little, had a hooked nose, was bald on top, had crooked legs and meeting eyebrows.) At the same time as criticizing Paul, they were absolutely taken in by false teachers in the church. These false teachers preached another Jesus, received another spirit, and proclaimed another Gospel than the one God had revealed. They robbed the people of God, bled them white by charging high fees for their ministry, and therefore people assumed they were far better and truer men than Paul. Indeed Paul sarcastically calls them "super apostles". But naturally they were the every agents of the Devil, corrupting the minds from the simplicity which was in Christ.

What do we do when we are criticized? Sometimes it is best to say nothing, and leave God to vindicate the truth in His own time. **When he was reviled, he reviled not again** (1 Peter 2:23). But in this case Paul responds, though hesitantly. He was not concerned with himself or his reputation, but he was concerned for the young church. The young Christians could be ruined and devastated by the accusations and false apostles. His life's work in the Gospel in Corinth could be destroyed, therefore he had to speak out.

Sometimes we have to speak out if people suspect we have no answer. It is difficult and delicate, a knife-edge decision. Paul does not ignore, or resent, or capitulate. He met the criticisms squarely and explains his faith and actions. The betrothed church was as a bride to Christ, and Paul was as a husband, anxious that the bride be a pure virgin. Much to learn from Paul's attitude. The Christian life is warfare, not a picnic. We are promised forgiveness and assurance, but not exemption from struggle and

opposition. But we are given the spiritual equipment to overcome antagonism and error.

Paul's attitude to his critics

There is nothing like unfair and unbalanced criticism to make us angry. We feel the injustice, unfairness and maliciousness of exaggerated reports of some action we took, or something we said that is taken right out of proportion, while other factors are conveniently forgotten. It really gets under our skin.

Paul's response to such reaction – he pleads by the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Christ was meek and lowly hearted (Matthew 11:29). Meekness is the capacity to accept injury without resentment, and praise without pride. Gentleness is restraint for ultimate good of those who might be harmed spiritually by a display of anger or passion. It is easy to win an argument and to lose men. We are to win, and not crush them.

But this does not mean Paul does not speak with authority, plainly and frankly. He was not in a passion or rage, but dealt with it as Christ would have done. **The servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient in humility, correcting those who are in opposition** (2 Timothy 2:24).

There are two ways of opening a stiff lock. One is to break it, and the other is to oil it. Paul uses the oil of meekness and gentleness to win over the hard core of the rebels. **Better a patient man than a warrior; a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city** (Proverbs 16:32). **Make every effort to add to your faith goodness, and to goodness knowledge, and to knowledge self-control** (2 Peter 1:5,6). If something needs to be said and ought to be said, it must be done in the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

Paul's testimony to his faith in Christ

In face of accusations and claims which were false and bogus, the apostle gives his testimony of what Christ means to him, his experience of Christ and his dependence on him. He makes it quite clear that he is sure he knows Christ, was called to be an apostle, and knows what he is talking about. **I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge** (2 Corinthians 11:6). False apostles may have been great orators and had great intelligence, but Paul knew what he was talking about. He was able to speak about Christ because he knew Him. He could preach the Gospel because he had experienced its power.

Once at a dinner party all the guests were called on to recite something afterwards. One of the people there was an actor, and with all his great oratory, elocution and dramatic art, he recited Psalm 23, to tremendous applause. He was followed by a quiet man, who also recited the 23rd Psalm, but without all the technique of the actor. At first there was quiet laughter among the guests, but by the end there was a stillness that was more eloquent than any applause. The actor was the first to speak. He said to the quiet man, "Sir, I know the psalm, but you know the shepherd."

Paul's opponents had the technique, art, self-advertisement and oratory. Paul was unskilled, no great orator, but he did know Christ. Authority was given to him by the Lord (2 Corinthians 10:8). He had been appointed or assigned his task by God (2 Corinthians 10:13). Called, appointed, directed by God, to be in God's will, doing the work which God has planned. This brings dignity and authority to the task (not the man). One of the exciting things about being a Christian is being in the place where God wants me, and doing the work God wants me to do. That is the only thing that matters in life, the only thing that will satisfy conscience. It gives meaning and purpose that nothing else can. **For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one the Lord commends** (2 Corinthians 10:18).

In doing God's work, Paul was totally dependent on God. **The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds** (2 Corinthians 10:4). He was not using the methods of the man of the world. He was not using worldly tricks, deceit and intrigue. But he was using spiritual methods – the power of God, His Word, prevailing prayer, the Holy Spirit, the armour of God. Every thought was brought into captivity to obedience to Christ.

The secret of exercising authority over others is knowing Christ's authority over us. We must not try to get others to do what we want, but to do what Christ wants. Paul was not concerned to assert his own position or will over his enemies, but he was concerned that both he and they obeyed the one common Lord and Saviour.

It is great comfort when the storm is raging, when accusations are made, when people try to undermine our confidence, to know that we are God's man or woman. We can be sure of Him, He appointed us, we can depend on Him, and our conscience is clear before Him. Men may say what they like, but His approval is all that matters. And what an impression that makes on people when they see we have such confidence in Christ.

At a house party at which Huxley, the great Victorian agnostic, was present, everyone planned to go to church on the Sunday morning. Huxley suggested to someone, "Suppose you don't go to church, but stay at home and tell me why you believe in Jesus and Christianity?" "But you, with all your cleverness, would demolish all I say." "I don't want to argue with you. Just tell me what this means to you." So the man stayed home and told Huxley, in the simplest terms, what Christ meant to him. At the end there were tears in the great agnostic's eyes. "I would give my right hand if only I could believe that." It wasn't clever argument, but simple heart-felt sincere faith in Christ which had got home.

The evidence in Paul's life

Finally in his defence, Paul points to his life and work. The work he had done at the church at Corinth, also its continuance as a result of Paul's labours and obedience. There was the evidence of lives that had been changed through his ministry. This was the seal of God's approval. He also reminds them of his sufferings and labour in the work of the Gospel (2 Corinthians 11:16ff). We realize how little we know of him, how fragmentary are the New Testament records. When Paul wrote this letter, he had lived up to the point which Luke records as far as Acts 19. Most of the things in this

list are not mentioned by Luke, e.g. having five times received 39 lashes from the Jews, three beatings (Luke only mentions one of the three), three shipwrecks and 24 hours in the open sea, and many more examples of the dangers he faced. He knew hunger, thirst, nakedness, cold, weariness and toil, and often went without sleep. On top of all this was the daily burden he carried, his concern for all the churches, which caused him great mental and spiritual stress, for he felt everyone else's pain when they were ill-treated and weak. "Paul wore his sufferings as a soldier wears his decorations."

Here are Paul's credentials as a genuine apostle of Christ. Christ meant so much to him, the Gospel was crucially important, the church of God was so precious, that he willingly went through all this. Health and comfort, safety and the necessities of life were secondary matters to him. His critics, with all their pretensions and pride, knew nothing of this. (Do we?) Here is the surest proof of God's call, purity of motives, knowledge of the Lord – Paul's life was under His authority.

What we are prepared to suffer for and sacrifice shows how important these things are in our lives. In the end, it is not what we profess or boast of, but the evidence in our lives. Evidences of suffering for Christ, denying self for Christ, costly service, paying a price, bearing in the body the marks of Christ Jesus – this is proof of whose we are, where our heart is, what is the most important thing in our lives. What evidences of sacrifice, cost, sufferings, and self-denials do we have of what Christ means to us?

Spurgeon was able to make the amazing claim, "You could take the story of my life and write it across the skies. I have nothing to hide." This is the claim which Paul is making. It went out as a challenge to his enemies and also to us. Can God bear witness to the quality of our service, self-denial and total surrender to His will?