

## Week 12, 2 Corinthians 11

### Hook



**Main Point:** Believers must hold on to true teachings about Jesus and boast in their weaknesses instead of their strengths.

**Group Activity:** The first emoji, a heart, was created for a pager in 1995.<sup>1</sup> Today, about 6 billion emoticons are sent around the world every day on mobile messaging apps.<sup>2</sup> Are your emoticon skills up to par? In small groups within your class, attempt to use nothing but emoticons/emojis to communicate the following hymn titles. Once your messages are completed, share with the class.

“Amazing Grace”

“At the Cross”

“Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

“In the Garden” (“I Come to the Garden Alone”)

“Be Thou My Vision”

***Do you frequently utilize images to relay ideas when you send messages? Why or why not?***

***Considering your contact list in your phone, with whom would you use emojis/emoticons?***

***Who in your contact list would not appreciate your communicating with emojis/emoticons?***

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theverge.com/2013/3/4/3966140/how-emoji-conquered-the-world>

<sup>2</sup> <http://digiday.com/brands/digiday-guide-things-emoji/>

**Transition:** In today's lesson, Paul will communicate in a way that the Corinthians will understand. The type of communicating (boasting) is foreign to Paul and is utilized in an attempt to rescue the church from a dangerous deception.

## Week 12, 2 Corinthians 11

### Book

**Main Point: Believers must hold on to true teachings about Jesus and boast in their weaknesses instead of their strengths.**

**Text Summary: 2 Corinthians 11** In efforts to meet the Corinthians where they are, Paul decides to “boast” of his accomplishments in order to follow the foolish rhetorical norms of this church, hoping to gain their ear. In the end of his “fool’s speech,” or list of accomplishments, he turns the idea of boasting on its head and elevates the Christian hallmark of weakness in tandem with God’s strength.

### 2 Corinthians 11:1–15 [Read]

**Sub-Point:** Believers must hold to the true Gospel so that they can identify and reject false gospels.

*Verses 1–6* Though in chapter 10, Paul draws the line between *proper* boasting (God-centered) and *improper* boasting (man-centered), in chapter 11 he reluctantly engages in the latter to gain the ear of the Corinthians. His reluctance to boast according to their etiquette is clear in verse 1, as he essentially says, “Bear with me as I play the fool so I can expose the foolishness of my opponents.”<sup>3</sup> Though he disdains doing it, he is forced to “answer a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:5).<sup>4</sup>

Paul begins to boast according to their standards in what commentators call the “fool’s speech,” which is known for parading one’s credentials in order to gain status and approval.<sup>5</sup> But first, verses 1–6 reveal Paul’s *justification* for engaging in this type of Corinthian boasting he so vehemently hates. *His appeal for the Corinthians to hear out his “fool’s speech” is based on three preliminary grounds.*

First, *Paul’s godly and paternal jealousy* (v. 2). Since the Corinthians were betrothed to Christ upon their conversion, he considered himself a “father of the bride” of sorts, whose fundamental goal was to present her blameless to the bridegroom (cf. 4:14, Ephesians 5:27).

Second, *Paul’s fears of their state of deception* (vv. 3–4). Paul clearly fears that dishonest teachers and false gospels, led ultimately by Satan himself (vv. 13–15), will steer the Corinthians

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<sup>3</sup> R Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 193-194.

<sup>4</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, revised ed., vol. 8, *2 Corinthians: an Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 240.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

astray from faithfulness to Christ, for they are already putting up with rivals in their midst who preach “another Jesus” than the true Christ. In verse 3’s metaphor, Eve (the Corinthian church) is in danger of being led away from Adam (Christ) by the serpent (the Devil and his representatives in Corinth).<sup>6</sup> In Paul’s mind, his hatred of employing the “fool’s speech” is not as strong as his desire to see the true Gospel reinstated in their church.

And third, *Paul’s authority*.<sup>7</sup> Paul states that the Corinthians should bear with his boasting because of his apostolic authority. If the Corinthians were willing to hear foolish boasting and different versions of the Gospel from false teachers (those whom he sarcastically labels as “super-apostles” in verse 5), they certainly owed Paul the floor to reveal his list of credentials and his version of the Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

Paul’s concern and love for the Corinthians clearly outweighed his hatred for their norms of boasting. Though he was admittedly deficient in this form of fleshly Greek rhetoric, he was willing to engage in it in order to protect this church from impending danger, using the knowledge of the Gospel (v. 6).

***What biblical situation does Paul pull from to explain the idea of deception (v. 3)? How does one fight the deception of the Enemy?***

***What are the Corinthians “putting up with,” according to verse 4?***

*Verses 7–15* In verses 7–15, Paul offers a final justification for his boasting: *his “no-charge” ministry in contrast with the paid ministry of the false apostles*.<sup>9</sup> In addition to their numerous misbeliefs about apostleship, the Corinthians were convinced by false teachers that accepting payment for teaching was another criterion for being a true apostle.<sup>10</sup> One must note that in the ancient world, refusing benefaction was an insult on the one who offered it and a clear rejection of friendship.<sup>11</sup> The Corinthian church could not fathom why Paul would take benefaction from other churches but not them. The false teachers took advantage of this confusion and used it as “proof” that Paul was not a true apostle.

Paul distinguished himself from the false apostles in Corinth in the way he labored with his own hands (1 Corinthians 4:12). He occasionally received unsolicited assistance from congregations,

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<sup>6</sup> David K. Lowery, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 578.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes, 194-196.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, 521.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, 196.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, 522.

<sup>11</sup> Kruse, 245.

as was the case concerning the Macedonians (v. 9) but was uneasy accepting support, as evidenced by his hyperbole in verse 8.

The Corinthians did not receive Paul's policy well, taking his refusal of their remuneration as a sign of a lack of love. Of course the apostle loves them but he must continue to stand firm to his policy with the Corinthians. Why? Paul has presented logic in refusing to receive support in other letters (1 Corinthians 9:17–18; 2 Thessalonians 3:9–10) but the immediate reason is to distinguish between his genuine ministry and the greed-fueled "ministry" of the false apostles (v. 12, 2:17).

Verses 13–15 provide a scathing description of the false apostles. They are liars, frauds that falsely claim to be apostles while actually being servants of Satan. Lowery describes verses 14–15:

*Like Satan's masquerade as an angel of light, they were masquerading (metaschēmatizomenoi, "changing the outward form") as apostles and servants of righteousness. Like whitewashed tombs they may have looked righteous but inside there was only death and decay (cf. Matt. 23:27–28), prefiguring their doom (end; cf. 1 Cor. 3:17).<sup>12</sup>*

***Who ended up providing for Paul's need, according to verse 9? Why is this ironic? Why wouldn't Paul accept the help of the Corinthians, knowing how much the Macedonians had suffered?***

***Whose servants are the false apostles? How are they like the one they serve (vv. 13–14)?***

This section serves as an explanation and an introduction for Paul's upcoming boastful remarks. While he hates to engage in such a self-obsessive practice, he eventually does it out of desperate love for the Corinthians. If only they would have ears to hear the dangers of accepting a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different Gospel (v. 4). Perhaps if he speaks to them according to their foolish norms, they will hear him. May we, too, have ears to identify false teaching and flee from any false gospel. We, like Paul, must be willing to exert great effort in order to hold true to the true Christ and His Gospel, however painstaking and uncomfortable it may be.

***What "false versions of Jesus" or "false gospels" pervade our culture today?***

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<sup>12</sup> David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 579.

## 2 Corinthians 11:16–33 [Read]

**Sub-Point:** God’s power is experienced in the believer’s weakness.

*Verses 16–29* Finally, Paul begins his “fool’s speech,” which parades his accolades and commendations in true Corinthian fashion. Paul “brags” of his impeccable religious credentials, severe apostolic trials, mighty works done through him, and surreal visionary experiences (vv. 22–29).<sup>13</sup> If anyone could win in these résumé competitions in Corinth, it was Paul. While he knows such worldly boasting is foolish and the opposite of godly, he deems it the necessary door to take in order to reach the fools with truth. He makes sure, however, that his hearers know that this strategy comes from him and not God, stating that he’s masquerading “as a fool” or “a madman” in order to comply with their norms of rhetoric (vv. 17–18). For Paul, playing the part of a foolish Corinthian helps make his point, but he dares not attribute such foolish speech to God.

***Why is it important that Paul lists severe trials alongside incredible visions?***

***What are all the spheres of “danger” Paul has faced in his ministry (vv. 26–27)? How is this different from how we view ministry today?***

***What anxiety does Paul carry with him daily (v. 28)?***

*Verses 30–33* Paul ends his list in verse 30 by explaining why his boasting is distinctive—he is proud of the evidences not of his strengths, but of his *weaknesses* so that God could display unbelievable power in his deliverance of Paul during these terrifying circumstances. Also, since his hearers may consider his lengthy and severe list of trials as gross exaggerations, he appeals to God’s omniscience to argue that he is not lying (v. 31).<sup>14</sup>

While verses 32–33 seem like random details added into this chapter, the story of Paul in the Damascus basket is actually a perfect conclusion to his point regarding weakness. One must remember that Damascus held for Paul the indelible memory of his conversion. He was once a self-righteous Pharisee, attacking Christians most gruesomely. But on the Damascus Road, he encountered Christ and received His call. To escape Damascus, in a weak and fearful moment, he was lowered in basket outside the city wall like a lowly criminal in the shadows. Yet on the other side of his lowly descent, God gave Paul the exhilarating ascent into His own presence (12:2–4). Damascus is where “Saul the Proud” was shattered and brought low, and “Paul the Lowly” was raised up into paradise itself.<sup>15</sup> For Paul, the “basket experience” was the paradigm for his entire life and the ethos behind his ministry—weakness being raised in God’s strength.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kruse, 230.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, 529.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hughes, 207.

While Corinth may see this situation as an embarrassing attempt to escape human hands, Paul sees it as the perfect place to display God's astonishing power and might in one who simply admits weakness.<sup>17</sup> After Paul lists what might be considered impressive "credentials" for apostleship, he turns the Corinthian model upside down by citing his *frailty* as the real basis for boasting, so that God may be glorified.

***What is Paul "indignant" about in verse 29?***

***What weak, embarrassing times in your life have ended up being times that God's power was at work?***

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<sup>17</sup> Harris, 529.

## Week 12, 2 Corinthians 11

### Took



**Main Point: Believers must hold on to true teachings about Jesus and boast in their weaknesses instead of their strengths.**

**Individual Activity:** Paul was a credible believer and witness, one whose life reflected Jesus. His life bore witness to his genuine faith and so earned him the right to speak boldly. Write down three characteristics of a credible Christian. Take a moment to prayerfully ask the Lord how you can better reflect these qualities this week.

**Lesson Conclusion:** Paul went to great lengths to help the Corinthians see their folly. Instead of blindly accepting different versions of the Gospel, they must hold true to the true Christ and His work on their behalf. Instead of welcoming harmful teachers in their midst, they should welcome only pure leaders with no ulterior motives. Instead of boasting in their strengths, they should boast in their weakness as Paul did, so they can experience the power of God at work.

### Challenge

**Identify the “fool’s speech” that you often tell yourself.** We all have a “fool’s speech” stored in our minds on the days that we don’t feel quite “up to par” in our spiritual lives. We are tempted, like the Corinthians, to trust in our credentials to make us feel acceptable and strong. In our mind, we parade our accomplishments, our religious activity, and even past hardships to assure ourselves that we are good leaders. Identify the things that are listed in your “fool’s speech,” and ask the Lord to rid you of the tendency to put your trust in *your* personal résumé instead of *Jesus’* résumé on your behalf.

**Pray for someone who believes in a false-version of Jesus or a false-gospel.** We all have friends or family members who believe in “a different Jesus,” as Paul would put it. Perhaps you know someone who views Jesus as their “homeboy” but not Master of the Universe. Perhaps you know someone who believes Jesus is love, but he does not dispense justice. Or maybe there’s someone in your life who struggles with the opposite view: that Jesus is demanding or judgmental, that He is narrow-minded to claim that “He’s the only way.” Or perhaps you know someone who believes a Gospel based on works—that if they are just good enough, they will



be fine before God. Pray for those people by name and ask God specifically to correct their view of Jesus and the Gospel through your influence in their life.

**Make a plan to lovingly correct those you listed in #2.** If there's anything we see in 2 Corinthians 11, it's that Paul is willing to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to make sure the Corinthians do not buy into false views about Jesus or salvation. Eternity is on the line, and Paul's concern for the Corinthians urgently burns hot and bright for their devotion to Christ. How can you show this same type of concern for those you listed in challenge #2? What conversation can you plan, this week, to help those you listed see a better view of Christ and His Gospel?