

“Sacrificing the World’s Esteem”
2 Corinthians 11:16-33
July 1, 2018
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pr. Nicoletti

We’re returning to Second Corinthians tonight, to the middle portion of what is often called Paul’s “Fool’s Speech,” where Paul confronts the Corinthians over their preference for the false teachers in Corinth and their corresponding rejection of him and even his message. We looked at an introductory portion last Lord’s Day, and now we look at some of the main parts of this section, as we turn to 2 Corinthians 11:16-33.

And so please listen carefully to 2 Corinthians starting in verse 16 of chapter 11 – this is God’s word for us this evening.

The Apostle Paul writes:

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

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

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

This is God’s Word.

Paul is doing two things at once in this passage – two things that, for reasons I’ll explain in a little bit, we probably need to separate out to more fully appreciate.

First, Paul is confronting the cultural roots of his opponents' – the false teachers' – boastings, and what attracts the Corinthians to them. And second, Paul is positively putting forward a theology of how weakness and suffering relate to the gospel and to following Christ. [Barnett, 530, 534]

Now, in his particular setting, Paul is able to do both of those things at once, but as I said, we will need to separate them out. We have already previously spoken about Paul's theology of weakness and suffering in earlier portions of 2 Corinthians, and that theme continues into our text that we will look at next week. So tonight, I want to focus on that first component – Paul's exposure and confrontation of the root values of the Corinthians and the false teachers.

What I want us to see, and what we maybe need to do a little bit of work to see, is that in our text Paul is exposing the Corinthians' enslavement to the *esteem* of their culture, and therefore their enslavement to the *values* of their culture. He is exposing their *captivity* to the esteem and values of their culture. And we can easily miss how forcefully he's doing that.

Paul, in this passage, is using "biting irony." [Barnett, 528] He's mocking the Corinthians and their false teachers with a speech that would have seemed utterly absurd to them. And the fact that it doesn't seem utterly absurd to us – the fact that this speech can actually seem kind of inspiring to us – shows just how much we can miss the original feel of this text.

Because we esteem those who suffer for what they believe in, but the dominant Roman culture in Paul's day did not. The Roman culture in which Paul ministered, and in which the Corinthians lived, valued strength and success – not weakness and suffering. And we need to appreciate how much that cultural difference shapes how this text comes across.

We esteem martyrs – those who suffer for what they believe. In fact we esteem them so much in our culture that we even admire those who would suffer for causes or beliefs that we don't agree with. We can go to a movie and watch a man or a woman suffer for a cause that we do not share in, and we can come away inspired and full of admiration for them, even if we still don't agree with their cause.

Now, that is so, in part, because we who are Christians are part of a church that has had a few more centuries than the Corinthians did to try to internalize the values that Paul espouses here. But even if you're not a Christian, I bet you share this value. Both religious movements and secular movements revere their martyrs – those who suffered for the cause even if they saw no success from it in their lifetime.

And I suspect that some of that is the result of us living in a post-Christian culture, rather than a pre-Christian culture. Many of the secular portions of our culture have continued to hold on to the Christian value on sacrificial suffering, even as they have rejected the theological basis for it in the gospel. And so across our culture, people continue to admire those who suffer for a cause, even if they see no fruit from their suffering.

But that was not the case in Paul's day, as he ministered in a pre-Christian world. They did not value such suffering. They valued success. They valued strength and power. Which is why Paul's opponents were so popular in Corinth and why Paul had fallen out of favor. Paul's life seemed to

be marked by suffering and weakness, while the false teachers in Corinth had strength and success. Paul lacked what the Roman culture esteemed, while the false teachers had it, and so the false teachers could effectively present Paul's misfortunes and humiliations "as signs of [his] inferiority and incompetence." [Barnett, 534]

And so in our text Paul uses irony to expose just how captive the Corinthians had become to their culture's esteem and values. [Wright, 123]

Irony, of course, can be misused and abused. Our culture is often overrun with unhelpful irony: irony whose chief purpose seems to be to signal the sophistication of the speaker rather than to say anything meaningful.

But David Foster Wallace points out that, used properly, irony has an important role in communication and even in society. "Irony and cynicism," he explains, are what hypocrisy calls for. "The great thing about irony," he says, "is that it splits things apart, gets up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates. [...] Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it." Irony reveals and diagnoses "unpleasant realities" that may be hidden – that may be lurking beneath the surface. [Wallace]

And that's how Paul is using it here. And the way he exposes those "unpleasant realities" for the Corinthians is by taking forms of culturally accepted speech for talking about one's achievements, and using those same forms to talk about his weaknesses. [Barnett, 529; Wright, 123]

The first form comes up in verses 24 and 25.

Paul Barnett points out that it was a common Roman custom to list one's accomplishments, giving the number of times you had received various commendations. In a first century work about the deeds of Augustus, Augustus follows this Roman custom of statistically listing his accomplishments. He declares to his audience: "*Twice* I received triumphal ovations. *Three* times I received curule triumphs. *Twenty* times and one did I receive the appellation of imperator."

Seeming to follow the same format in verses 24 and 25, Paul writes: "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea." [Barnett, 541-542]

The format would have been familiar to many in Roman culture, and the ironic contrast would have been striking.

Paul does something similar in verses 31 through 33.

Commentators point out that Paul here is referencing what was known as the "crown of the wall." [Wright, 125-127; Barnett, 553, n.58]

In ancient Rome the "crown of the wall" was a literal crown that was designed to look like a city wall. It was an award given in Paul's day, and for centuries before that.

The crown was awarded for one specific kind of military achievement. A common feature of ancient warfare was the siege. An attacking army would surround a town or city and demand its surrender. They would attack the gates, but these attacks might be resisted. They might cut off supplies, but a town or city may have its own food and water supplies, and so they could sometimes resist the siege for months. And so what attacking armies would do is they would make long ladders and put them against the city walls for soldiers to climb up.

Now – climbing up such ladders was of course incredibly dangerous. Defending soldiers would try to push the ladders over while soldiers were on them, they'd shoot arrows at them, pour boiling liquids on them, and if a climbing soldier did get near the top, those defending the walls had other weapons to fight him, and the one climbing would find himself terribly outnumbered.

To motivate soldiers to climb those ladders despite all the dangers, Rome awarded the “crown of the wall” “to the soldier who was the first one over the wall.”

Wright explains, “In order to claim the ‘crown of the wall’, the person who actually was the first one over the wall had to return to Rome and swear a solemn oath, invoking the gods to witness that he was telling the truth. [Something like:] ‘I swear before the holy gods, who know I’m telling the truth, that, when we were attacking the city, I was the first one over the wall.’ And [then] the crown would be awarded.” [Wright, 126 – entire description from Wright 125-126]

And it’s likely something like that that the Corinthians would have had in mind when they read Paul say, “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.”

Paul once again was turning Roman values on their head – taking the format by which Romans expressed their achievements, what gave them esteem in the Roman world, and using it to show his weaknesses – his lack of esteem in the Roman world.

As Paul Barnett puts it: “It is difficult to escape a note of ignominy here. No scaler of the wall bringing victory he; no crown of gold for his crowning victory. Rather, like a coward in battle, he ‘escapes’ through the wall and is lowered to the ground in what may have been a fish basket!” [Barnett, 555]

The real punch of what Paul is doing is a bit lost on us, as we don’t have these forms of speech. But they would not have been lost on the original audience. The absurdity would have been striking. N. T. Wright writes, “[Paul] is, of course, teasing them to bits. At one level he is deadly serious, but this passage is also a wonderful comic parody. Even those in Corinth who were annoyed at having their favorite hobby caricatured in this way must still have found it clever and amusing. Paul is at last writing his own ‘letter of recommendation’, but he’s like someone applying for a job by listing all the things that would normally disqualify him straight away. Prison, beatings, official floggings, stoning, shipwrecks: in the ancient world all these would mean not only that you were an unsavory character whom most people rightly avoided, but that the gods must be angry with you as well. The dangers he faced and the hardships he endured were not the sort of

thing that cultured and educated people, the great and the good, would put up with; they would have insisted on a military escort, or at least on travelling with people who could protect them. They wouldn't expect to have to go hungry, or cold, or without sleep; that would be very demeaning. Yet these are precisely the things that Paul boasts of.” [Wright, 128]

Paul's opponents had been pointing out to the Corinthians that Paul had utterly failed to live up to their culture's values. He had no esteem in the Roman world's eyes. And Paul is not disputing that here. If anything, Paul is emphasizing it even further! He wants them to see that the false teachers' claim in this area is completely true.

But Paul is not worried about *that*. What he *is* worried about is how captive the Corinthians have become to their culture's esteem. How scared they are to be associated with anyone who does not possess the traits that the Roman world values. They have become enslaved to the culture's esteem, and so enslaved to the culture's values, and so enslaved (as he points out in verse 20) to any false teachers who meet the culture's values, even if it means rejecting an apostle of Christ.

Paul is worried that the Corinthians have valued the world's esteem over Christ's esteem. That is what he is using irony here to reveal.

What then does that look like for us? Not for others in the culture, but for us – for you and for me?

I suppose there are a number of answers – a number of ways we might struggle with this.

But thinking of our dominant demographic here ... and so, broadly speaking, about middle and upper-middle class, mostly white, fairly well-educated, Reformed Presbyterians ... I think one of our biggest fears is being seen as stupid. I think we're often terrified of being perceived as stupid.

And I think that fear of being seen as “stupid” can take a number of specific forms. Let me name just three.

I think we're afraid of being seen as anti-intellectual, I think we're afraid of being seen as ignorantly judgmental, and I think we're afraid of being seen as opposed to human happiness and flourishing.

Let me start with the first one.

Some of you may remember the televised debate a few years ago with Ken Ham, the prominent young-earth six-day-creationist president of Answers in Genesis and the Creation Museum on the one side, and the agnostic scientist Bill Nye, known from his popular science show years ago as “Bill Nye the science guy” on the other side. The debate was over evolution and human origins. It got a good bit of attention. I didn't watch it. I still don't have much interest in watching it.

But what I remember noticing when it happened was that most of the Christians I knew who commented on it on social media were far more concerned with distancing themselves from Ken Ham than anything else. And I wasn't the only one who noticed that.

Michael Brendan Dougherty, writing for *The Week* noticed the same thing. Dougherty is a conservative Christian, but not a six-day-creationist or a young-earther. But reflecting on the event and the responses he saw among Christians, he writes “At the risk of looking the fool, may I offer a confession, laced with a little whimsy? In most times and most places, I have a load of sympathy and even admiration for six-day creationists, ‘young Earthers,’ and fundamentalists. As the debate between Ham and Nye unfolded, I found myself more and more disgusted with some of the self-styled ‘sophisticated’ Christians performing their giggles at Ham for all the world to see. There was something just a little ugly about all these Christians rushing up to their platforms, drawing attention to the sweat on their brow, putting a concerned look upon their faces, and proclaiming that fundamentalism is a ‘modern’ error. And then when they were sure everyone was listening, lift[ing] up their eyes heavenward to pray, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like this mouth-breather Ken Ham.’” Dougherty goes on to say that these ‘sophisticated’ Christians are striking a pose, and not necessarily one that is any more scientifically literate than the six-day creationists they find so embarrassing.

At the end of his article Dougherty writes “The bulk of creation[ism]’s fundamentalists are deeply sincere. And, better than that, they are willing to be, in St. Paul’s words, ‘fools for Christ’s sake.’ They do not live for the world’s esteem. And so when the world next discovers a sophisticated ideology to get around ‘Thou shall not murder,’ I’d rather have one [obstinate] fundie next to me than the whole army of eye-rolling Christians lining up to denounce him.”

Now Dougherty’s point is not to do away with scientific inquiry or sophisticated biblical research and interpretation – he explains that in other parts of the article. His point is that this is often one area where we reveal that though we are Christians, we may also still be enslaved to the world’s esteem.

Is that a temptation for you? Do you hold to your more “sophisticated” Biblical interpretations primarily because you find them to be the most convincing interpretation of biblical truth? Or is the primary motivation you have for holding them the fear of being laughed at – of being seen as stupid – as an unintellectual fundamentalist? Is the same dynamic operating in your heart as was operating in the hearts of the Corinthians?

Another place we may struggle with this is the fear of being seen as ignorantly judgmental. R. R. Reno has argued that our culture is not morally relativistic so much as it is focused on the value of nonjudgmentalism, which tells us that no one should state or even imply that someone else’s life choices are wrong or bad, and that to do so is ignorant – it’s a sign of being unenlightened, backwards, medieval. And so when we talk about anything moral, we tend to hedge. We speak as indirectly as possible. We are careful to present our Christian morality in language that can be easily misunderstood as mere suggestion.

Again, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t be careful in how we speak about the morally sensitive issues of our day, or that we shouldn’t be careful to be humble in how we speak of sin and failure. We should.

My point is that a lot of times the way we talk about moral questions is guided less by our desire to be loving to those we speak to, and more by our fear of being seen as ignorant by other people

– our fear of losing the world’s esteem. I think too often, the dynamic operating in our hearts is the same as the Corinthians’.

Or let’s consider just one more: Our fear of being seen as opposed to human happiness and flourishing. Now, what do I mean by this?

Charles Taylor, in his work *A Secular Age*, talks about how historic Christianity has a tension at the heart of how it views human happiness and flourishing. On the one hand, Christianity heartily affirms that the world is good, that ordinary human life is good, that human flourishing in this life is good, and that human enjoyment of, and happiness over, God’s good gifts here and now are also good. But at the same time, Christianity also firmly teaches that human happiness and flourishing in this life are not our *highest* good. There are some things, in particular our love for and loyalty to God, which are more important than our happiness and flourishing in this life. And so, though happiness and flourishing might be good things, we may be called on by God to sacrifice them for something even more important and more valuable – our relationship to God. [Taylor, 16-18]

Now, if you’re a Christian, you would hopefully agree with that, at least in theory. And if you’re not a Christian, you should be able to at least admit that if a spiritual realm does exist above the material realm we see, then there might very well be things in that realm that are more valuable than things in this realm, and worth sacrificing the things of this life for.

Nonetheless, one of the significant features of secularism, as Taylor describes it, is a form of humanism that accepts “no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond human flourishing.” [Taylor, 18]

And so, in modern secular society, there is no greater value than human happiness and flourishing in this life.

Now, as I’ve said, we need to note first that the God of the Bible delights in human flourishing and happiness. But the second thing we need to acknowledge is that the God of the Bible also calls us at times to sacrifice human flourishing and happiness in this life for something greater – something beyond this life and beyond this world. And because we live in the culture we live in, I think many of us find it much easier to speak of the first than the second.

You see this when discussions come up between Christians and non-Christians on issues of personal morality – things like premarital sex or homosexuality. Christians will often try to convince non-Christians how much happier they would be if they were living according to a Christian ethic, and assert again and again how unhappy they know the non-Christian must really be, no matter what they say.

Now, I think those arguments are often right. I think living *with* the grain of creation, rather than against it – living according to the way God made the world, rather than in conflict with it – these things generally lead to a more happy and fulfilling life.

But that said ... sin can be pretty fun. I mean, we can't have it both ways. If sin wasn't so fun so much of the time, then people wouldn't sin as much as they do, and we Christians wouldn't want to sin as much as we often want to.

And so, when we make those arguments about flourishing and happiness and morality, I wonder how often we are just scared to say that the gospel *does indeed* call us to give up things that might make us happy in this life, that God calls people to give up things that bring flourishing and happiness in this life in order to serve an even greater purpose, that Christ calls people to take up their cross and follow him. And crosses were not associated in the first century with happiness or human flourishing. When we are scared to say these things ... is the same dynamic that was operating in the Corinthians' hearts operating in our hearts as well?

The point, again, is not that intellectual sophistication, or moral nuance, or human flourishing and happiness are bad things – they're not. They are no more bad things than strength and success were bad things in Corinth. The point Paul is making is not that these things are inherently bad, but that we can become captive to these cultural values – we can put these values above Christ's values. And we can be tempted to do this because we put the world's esteem above Christ's esteem.

So that is the problem Paul is trying to unmask in our text.

What then is his solution?

What Paul reminds us by the example of his life, and as a point implied throughout our text, is that faithfulness to Christ means being willing to sacrifice the esteem of our culture.

That is, of course, what Paul did.

Paul has listed some of his sufferings for the sake of Christ in our text, and we need to keep in mind that they were not only physically painful, but they were humiliating. And there wasn't any grand background music playing when he experienced them – those moments did not *feel* inspiring, like so many movies do when the hero suffers. Those moments felt discouraging, and humiliating, and Paul felt despised by the world in concrete, un-romanticized ways.

Look again at his list of sufferings. In verse 24 he mentions the five beatings he had received at the hands of the Jews, beatings that were not only painful, but as Josephus puts it, were considered “a most disgraceful penalty.” [Barnett, 542.]

In verse 25 he mentions the three times he was “beaten with rods.” This is the Roman form of beatings, in contrast to the Jewish form Paul had just mentioned. A Roman citizen, like Paul, was not supposed to receive this kind of humiliating treatment, but apparently that rule was disregarded at least three times in Paul’s life. [Barnett, 542]

He was stoned. He was shipwrecked. He was often on the road at a time when traveling was not always safe, even with the peace Rome tried to maintain. In verse 26 he highlights how at a time where few bridges were available while traveling, he found himself frequently in danger crossing rivers. He found himself in danger from robbers, from fellow Jews, from Gentiles, every place he

went, even in the churches, where false brothers threatened him – like the very false brothers he was having to deal with at Corinth. [Barnett, 544-545] Unlike a finely paid public speaker, he did the hard and often dirty work of tent making to support himself, and he still found himself often in want. [Barnett, 547] And then despite all of his sacrifices he lived in constant anxiety about the churches he ministered to – including the fear that after all he had done, they might still reject him and the gospel he had taught them. [Barnett, 548] All of these things were not just physical hardships, but instances in which Paul was sacrificing the esteem of the world around him.

And why did he do it?

Because he knew that the esteem of Christ was worth far more than anything he was sacrificing. Paul knew that nothing would compare with the value of the esteem of Christ.

And we should be able to appreciate that too.

Anyone should be able to acknowledge that the esteem of this world is fickle. People rapidly rise and fall. Sometimes it makes sense why one person gets the world's esteem and another loses it, but just as often there is little discernable rhyme or reason to it.

But if there really is a personal God who made all things, if there really is a God who rules the universe, if there really is a God whom we will one day stand before and have to answer to for our lives, if there really is a God whom we will spend all eternity with ... then of course his esteem matters more than anything else. It matters more than anything else in the universe. And if that God is Jesus Christ (and he is), then Christ's values and esteem trump this world's values and esteem every time.

And that knowledge is why Paul is more than willing to sacrifice the esteem of the world around him.

Do you see the implications of that for your own life?

If God, the creator of the universe, has spoken, then shouldn't we be willing to sacrifice the fleeting approval of our culture in order to trust what God has told us? Shouldn't we trust the maker of all things even if it leads some of his creatures to laugh us to scorn as anti-intellectual?

If sin truly leads to death – eternal death – then shouldn't we be willing to lovingly, carefully, but firmly speak truth about sin, urging others to submit their lives to Christ, even if it means sacrificing the fleeting approval of a culture that demands non-judgmentalism?

If we human beings really were made for something even greater than human happiness and flourishing in this life, if something greater than human happiness and flourishing in the here and now really does exist, and if Christ offers it to us, then shouldn't be we willing to encourage others to sacrifice what may seem good or fulfilling here for something even greater? Shouldn't we be willing to sacrifice the fleeting approval of a culture that demands that we all affirm that there is nothing greater to live for than happiness and success in this life?

And the same reasoning is true for other areas too.

Paul's speech in 2 Corinthians 11 would have sounded crazy to his original audience. But it was far more rational than anything his opponents were suggesting.

As Christians in a post-Christian world we are called to be strong and courageous. But even the strength and the courage we are called to will not look like strength and courage to the world. It will be mocked and scorned. It will be seen as stupid and shameful in a variety of ways.

Are we willing to do it anyway? Are we willing to sacrifice the esteem of this world – to sacrifice the esteem of the men and women, the friends and family, the neighbors and coworkers around us? Are we willing to sacrifice it not because it's bad, but in faithfulness to something even more precious?

And if we are willing, do we appreciate the value of what we are pursuing? Do we appreciate with Paul that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”? If so, then with Paul, let us not lose heart.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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