

2 Corinthians 11:16-23, “The Primary Identifying Mark of Greatness”

10.10.21

As you're turning in your Bibles, I want to share something with you that we, as your staff, believe is a really wonderful thing for you and your family. Take a look at the screens.



As a church, we've chosen to partner with a group called Right Now Media. RightNow Media is Bible studies on demand App (ROKU) that's been described as the Netflix of Christian Bible studies, and the church is providing this for you and your family for FREE! I want you to watch this minute-and-a-half-video describing it...

Get equipped. Get Inspired. That's our goal church family. We want you to get into the Bible. Because, if you will...you will strengthen your family and you will be much more equipped to navigate this crazy world we're living in. Again, RightNow Media has everything from men's and women's studies to family studies, topical studies, to book studies, studies on marriage, finances, and tons of interactive biblical studies for kids. Mom and dad...this is something you can use in your family devotions.

Church, our desire is to make disciples and to train you to make disciples within your families. So, this is our gift to you and your family, because we love you and want to invest in you. You're going to be receiving an email to the email address we have for you in our database, on Sunday, October 24th inviting you to sign up for your free account.

Make sure we have your updated email address if it's changed. If you don't want to receive email updates on the new studies, etc., just opt out. But, we hope you won't, we hope you will use it...create a new habit in your home. It's better than watching the Voice or Bachelorette, I promise you! BTW, this resource is going to be available for every Sunday School class in the church as well, so we're excited about that too! So, be on the lookout for the rollout on Sunday, October 24th!

As we begin this morning, I want to ask this question: **What defines greatness?** What makes a person great? Is it because they're famous or rich, successful or talented? What actually defines greatness? Well, it would probably help to say at this point, that it depends on who you ask. If you ask someone who isn't a Christian...then, they might say being famous or rich or popular or super successful makes you great... But, if you ask a Christian, who uses the Bible as their guide, you will get a much different answer.

Could I offer to us this morning what I believe is the “**Primary Identifying Mark of Greatness**,” from a Christian perspective. The primary identifying mark of greatness is HUMILITY. You see, **humility** is the theme that runs throughout the last four chapters of this amazing letter. Humility! Yes, the key to understanding this 2nd letter to the Corinthian Church in 56 AD is to understand how much Paul hated pride, how much he hated to boast. He didn’t even want to say what was true about himself, to defend himself...for fear it that it might somehow bring honor to himself rather than to the Lord.

Church family, pride is the opposite of humility and we all know PRIDE is sin. Pride is hateful to God. Pride is all about being self-righteous and an arrogant heart. Scripture teaches that pride is forbidden because it defiles a person, hardens the mind and hinders our ability to see God. Pride inhibits spiritual growth and leads people to contempt for God and His Word and even God’s servants; it produces anger, contentiousness, envy, jealousy and self-deception. Those guilty of pride are warned in Scripture that God will resist them, judge them, punish them, and destroy them.

Proverbs 16:19

It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.

1 Peter 5:5b

⁵ Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

That’s just two verses on humility...I could share dozens...but, let me summarize. The Scriptures promise that if you and I have humility: we will enjoy the presence of God, be honored by God, be the object of God’s personal care, be lifted up by God, be considered the greatest in the Kingdom of God, we will receive the grace of God, we will inherit the earth and we will be like Jesus. Wow! All for just being humble!! Do you think God desires for us to be humble? Indeed, He does!

The Apostle Paul was humble AND GREATLY BURDENED! He was burdened and overwhelmed by the fact that the Corinthian church was being taken down a path of deception and it was eating him alive! And so, in our passage this morning, Paul has to continue his defense of his ministry in the face of the false teachers who had infiltrated the church at Corinth. Paul hates what he’s having to do and this is why Paul apologizes for what he is writing to them. Watch...

2 Corinthians 11:16-23

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would^[a] but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

Paul is very uncomfortable defending himself. Can you tell that? It’s repulsive to him...but, a defense of his ministry is necessary, because it’s actually a defense of the Gospel. Listen, if Paul goes down to the accusations of these False Teachers, then the truth of who Jesus Christ is will too! And I believe this entire situation made Paul sick to his stomach and he felt utterly foolish...crazy! “I shouldn’t even have to be doing this! But, I’m forced to it...to defend myself and

all the Lord has done through my life to combat these lies and show you that I'm a true Apostle of Christ. See vs. 16 again.

2 Corinthians 11:16-17

¹⁶ I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would^[a] but as a fool.

Paul was saying, "this is not according to the Lord," in other words...this is me acting like a fool even going into this discussion, but I have no choice...the Gospel is at stake and I've got to try to salvage what's in Corinth.

You know, as I read and studied this passage, I just shook my head in amazement and thought to myself: "This whole situation is really crazy. It's amazing to me that Paul had to go to such great lengths to convince the Corinthians of what they should have known." What's even crazier is that the Corinthians seemed to respect "boasting and arrogance." Why? Because they were putting up with the arrogance of these false teachers...but the truth is...that's how the Corinthians were! ARROGANT! Remember back in 1 Corinthians how the Corinthians continually bragged about how spiritual they were and how they had all of these amazing spiritual gifts and compared themselves to one another constantly? These people were immersed in brag-fests all the time!

Church family remember what we've been seeing in Corinth. Paul's apostolic credentials were under massive attack...tremendous assaults on his character were taking place. Remember, these false teachers were nothing more than tools of Satan with their different Jesus, their different spirit and their different gospel. They were cons! They came in with their Satanic lies. They disguised themselves as angels of light, as servants of righteousness, but they were liars...assaulting Paul viciously. They attacked him personally and said, (in essence), that he was ugly...that he wasn't a flashy orator (couldn't speak well), that he was untrustworthy and unreliable...all to create doubt about his integrity and character and MOST OF ALL to denigrate his message by saying it wasn't the TRUE Gospel.

Church family, did you know the Apostle Peter dealt with the same issues? Yet, his character wasn't attacked like Paul's was. But, Peter was just as alarmed that false teachers were going to infiltrate the churches just as Paul was concerned. Peter, like Paul, called on Christians to be very careful about the spread of false teaching in the churches. Let me show this to you. **Turn in your Bibles to 2 Peter.**

The Book of 2 Peter was written at the end of Peter's life. Peter was killed in Rome, just like Paul. But, he wasn't decapitated as Paul was... Church history tells us he was crucified upside down. Ultimately, Peter was killed during the reign of Nero around 12 years after Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, around 68AD, and so, as you turn to 2 Peter, chapter 3, this was the last letter he ever wrote and here is the end of that letter.

2 Peter 3:14-18

¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. ¹⁵ And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. ¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and

knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Dear church, Paul wrote Scripture, and all Scripture is inspired by God...and so, of course Satan is going to seek to distort Scripture and use people to distort Scripture. God's Word is what Satan has been attacking since the Garden of Eden and will continue to attack until he's finally thrown into the Lake of Fire after Christ's Millennial Reign.

Paul continues to flip the script on these false teachers.

2 Corinthians 11:18

¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

The "many" in this verse were the false teachers. He says, "They boast according to their flesh, that's according to their human achievements." You see, they weren't boasting about what God had done **FOR** them. They weren't boasting about what God had done **IN** them. They were not boasting about what God had done **THROUGH** them. Why? Because He hadn't done anything, because they weren't believers. They didn't know God; God wasn't operating in their lives...they were tools of Satan...they were part of his kingdom of Darkness.

I'll tell you, church, this is such a hard place to be for Paul or for anyone else for that matter who is falsely accused, when people say things about you that aren't true and you're forced into some necessary type of self-defense for the preservation of the truth. That's exactly where Paul was with all of this. And boy does he use supreme sarcasm (and remember, this is divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit who's carrying Paul along...writing the very words of God).

2 Corinthians 11:19

¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves!

Paul is saying, "How foolish are you really? You people are blowing my mind! I've taught you better than this. But apparently, you think you are SO WISE. SO SMART. SO INTELLIGENT. I'm the fool, you are the wise ones! **Now watch verse 20.** This is so amazing! Paul is going to describe 5 ways these guys were abusing them!

2 Corinthians 11:20

²⁰ For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

This is such a profound and sobering verse. It's perhaps the most pointed verse up to this point in the entire letter. Look at the screens. See the five things that Paul said that the false teachers were doing to the Corinthians. They're making you:

1. **Slaves**
 2. **Devouring you**
 3. **Taking advantage of you**
 4. **Putting on airs**
 5. **Striking you in the face**
-

Wow! That's crazy! Paul says, "You are allowing them to make you slaves"...which means, putting you into bondage. And that's what Satan does. He seeks to make us slaves to his lies to keep us from the freedom of Jesus. In this case it was the bondage of legalism in all the rites, rituals, purifications and rules of Judaism, particularly circumcision. And Paul said, "They're devouring you!" And you know, Jesus said something similar to the people he was teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem on one occasion.

Luke 20:46-47

⁴⁶“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁷ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

It seems it's always about money and power with false teachers. Money controls the motives of so many people, that's why the Paul never took a dime from the Corinthians...to counter the false teachers' ploys. Do you see what's been happening? These men had infiltrated the church and were manipulating the people with their charismatic teaching and they began to take control of the church, and as they did so, **they took their money**. They were like parasites...leeches sucking the life out of their victims. Like the prosperity gospel preachers have been doing this for decades in our country. They become rich at the expense of their followers.

That's why Paul said, “They're taking advantage of you and doing so in such a way that they're flaunting it before you...they're putting on airs...lording over you, even to the point of hitting you in the face! Can you imagine that...that they even allowed these people such authority that they could abuse them physically and get away with it. **Church, that's not of Christ!** Think about what we were singing earlier: “Death Was Arrested.”

**Released from my chains I'm a prisoner no more
My shame was a ransom He faithfully bore
He cancelled my debt and He called me His friend
When death was arrested and my life began**

Jesus sets us free...but these men wanted to put people into bondage...Jesus said this: (In fact, Tim quoted this Wed night as well):

Matthew 20:25-28

²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Humility! Service. Do you want to serve like Christ? Or do you want to be served? Most want to be served. How about in this church? If every church member were just like you, what kind of church would we have? Would we be able to minister to our community? Would we be able to financially survive? Would we have any teachers, any workers to run sports programs or park cars, serve coffee, sing in the choir, or play instruments? What if the church were just like you? It takes humility to serve and that's why there are so few servants...

Paul continues in verse 21 with dripping sarcasm...

2 Corinthians 11:21

²¹ To 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.

This is so sarcastic! Paul means the exact opposite of what he saying! Paul just as easily could have said, “*You should be ashamed! You have disgraced yourselves. You ought to be ashamed for your absolute stupidity in gladly receiving these liars into your midst. Can't you see what they're*

doing! They have enslaved, exploited, dominated and humiliated you and you take it. I GUESS MY TEAM WAS TOO WEAK TO SMACK YOU AROUND AND TREAT YOU LIKE THAT. SHAME ON US!”

Instead, Paul uses sarcasm: “No, we’re the weak ones...and the evidence of that is because we never took a dime...we worked our fingers to the bone when we were with you...we served you night and day...we didn’t abuse you or take advantage of you...I guess we were JUST TOO WEAK FOR THAT...I’m the FOOL!”

Can you feel the pain Paul is feeling? Can you feel the hurt? He’s astounded that the Corinthians have fallen for these blatant lies. (Remember he’s not there), so the cat’s away...the mice will play. And it just breaks his heart...so, he has to point out (yet again) that he has the qualifications to go against these evil liars...

2 Corinthians 11:22

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

This verse puts Paul on at least equal footing with these guys. Because it seems they’ve been questioning Paul’s heritage and his credentials. Yet Paul could trace his family line all the way back to the tribe of Benjamin and ultimately to Abraham (he speaks of that in Philippians 3). Paul knew Aramaic, he lived his whole adult life in Palestine, and he followed all the Hebrew traditions to the letter...to the point of being elevated to a Pharisee. He was educated in his youth under Gamaliel in Jerusalem... (Gamaliel being one of the premier teachers of the Jewish law of that day.) Paul had more credentials than any of these guys. He was actually chosen and appointed by Jesus Himself!

2 Corinthians 11:23

²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.

You know Paul could have said, “I have planted church after church after church. I’ve led thousands to Christ. I’ve healed hundreds! I’ve watched people burn idols that used to worship them. Paul could have talked about those amazing things. But, he didn’t. Instead, he talked about all that he’d been through in his life (and we’ll see more of this in our next message), because he talked about his struggles, his pain...imprisonments, beatings...being near death. Do you understand? That’s what it means to be a servant of Christ. It means we must be willing to suffer for Jesus!

Listen, living for Jesus is not an easy life. It’s going against the grain! It’s being willing to be treated like the scum of the earth if it means God’s plan is accomplished. And you see, that’s the exact opposite of what those guys were teaching...they were pushing prosperity...putting on airs...living in opulence...and so to hear Paul say these things seemed INSANE! That’s what he said: “I’m talking like a madman!”

Church, what made Paul continue to take this abuse? What made him keep loving these people and coming back over and over again? You can say, “Love.” That’s true...but that was driven by **humility.**

In 1737 (think of that date), Jonathan Edwards said this:

“The first and worst cause of errors that abound in our day and age is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the

mind and mislead the judgment. Pride is the main handle by which he has hold of Christian persons and the chief source of all the mischief that he introduces to clog and hinder a work of God. Spiritual pride is the main spring or at least the main support of all other errors. Until this disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases.”
Jonathan Edwards, evangelist and pastor

As we close I'll ask: Are you prideful today? The false teachers of Corinth were. Listen, if your pride causes you to exalt yourself, you're actually painting a target on your back and inviting God to open fire. And He will. He is determined for His children to live in humility... Remember, it was pride that caused Lucifer to be cast out of heaven and Adam and Eve to be cast out of Eden. And it is pride that will be our undoing if we tolerate it in our lives.

Oh, it's easy to think we aren't prideful...to see pride in others, but not in ourselves. How can we tell if we're prideful? Ask yourself this: How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or other people refuse me or take notice of me, or seem to get it better than me? How much do I want to see someone else suffer or get their due? We must ask ourselves: Can I swallow hard and say Lord, "It's not about me...it's about you...and I will not seek status or position or popularity for the sake of my own ego...but, I will seek you in quiet of humility, I will humble myself to bring you glory." We were singing "His Mercy Is More."

**What riches of kindness He lavished on us
His blood was the payment, His life was the cost
We stood 'neath a debt we could never afford
Our sins they are many, His mercy is more**

How did Jesus do that? Humility. He humbled Himself to the weight of the cross...the weight of your sin and my sin. Jesus Christ BY the very act of leaving heaven, coming to earth, and taking the form of man, demonstrated a humbling of Himself that we'll never fully be able to fathom. Humility.

Throughout his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated humility. He said: "I have come not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many." And to prove it...he began on the last night of His life...



with a towel and basin and He washed His disciples' dirty feet, the feet that would run away from Him. Oh, what humility. Might we today follow His example of humility and be people willing to don the towel and the basin. Are you humble? Am I?
