

“THE FLAWS IN BOASTING”

2 Corinthians 11:16-21

Theme: Those who boast about themselves are failing to exalt Christ Jesus.

Introduction: We live in a culture that celebrates self-promotion, where boasting is not only accepted but expected. In business, politics, entertainment, and even ministry, people are often measured by how loudly they proclaim their own greatness. Social media highlight reels of accomplishment, appearance, and activities. We value the “look at me!” attitude that involves posting pictures of even mundane things, like what I’m eating. We’ll exaggerate our lives to gain the admiration of anyone who will listen or look. Such self-exalting attitudes find expression through pride, conceit, haughtiness, boastfulness, presumption, and a caste-like perspective that categorizes people into a “haves or have-nots” dichotomy, determining whether one will associate with them.

But in **2 Corinthians 11:16–21**, the apostle Paul turns this entire mindset on its head. Confronting a church that had been impressed by arrogant false teachers, and had therefore been led astray doctrinally, Paul reluctantly adopts their method, not to exalt himself, but to expose their folly.

This portion of Scripture drips with irony and holy sarcasm. Paul is not comfortable boasting, but he does so “as in foolishness” to show just how far the Corinthians have drifted from spiritual discernment. They had been tolerating abusive leaders while dismissing the true apostle who bore the marks of Christ’s suffering.

This evening, we’ll consider this godly jealousy in two parts:

- I. **The Foolishness in Boasting – vv. 16-17**
- II. **The Frustration with Boasting – vv. 18-19**
- III. **The Forfeiture in Boasting – vv. 20-21**

This is a call not only to examine our loyalty to Christ but to renew our passion for guarding the gospel and protecting the hearts of others from anything that would steal their love from the Savior. Our theme is: ***We must pursue spiritual fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ.***

I. The Foolishness in Boasting – 11:16-17

A. The Conflict in Boasting – v. 16

1. Paul continues his defense against the so-called “super apostles” who were luring the Corinthians away from the true Gospel through false teaching and boastful self-promotion.
2. In this section, to confront these false teachers’ pride and foolish boasting, Paul sarcastically demonstrates that he can also engage in foolishness.
3. Essentially, he is saying, “If arrogant, abusive boasting is so

persuasive to you, for the sake of the Gospel, allow me to speak like a fool for a moment!”

4. He states: *“Again I say, let no one think me foolish ...”*
5. Paul is already on record for loathing self-promotion and boasting – cp. 2 Corinthians 10:12, 17-18.
6. Indeed, the word *“foolish”* [ἄφρων] – means “the lack of prudence or good judgment.”
7. Hence, it is difficult for Paul to engage in it as he says, *“... but if you do [think me foolish], receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little.”*
8. There is an emphasis in these words – he emphasizes the personal pronouns – *“receive me”* even as you give respect to the false teachers, *“so that I also may boast”* even as you value the false teachers.

B. The Contradiction in Boasting – v. 17

1. Paul pauses to note the solemnity of what tactic he uses – not that it is sinful, or that it is not under the direction of the Holy Spirit, but not something for which the Lord provided any precedent.
2. He states: *“What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness”* – that is, according to what the Corinthians value and to which they grant credence.
3. The essence of what he considers foolishness is *“... in this confidence of boasting.”*
4. In this, despite how distasteful it is to him, or how conflicted he is in doing so, or even how contradictory it is to the precedents set by the Lord, Paul declares that he is willing, for the sake of the Gospel, to be God’s fool.
5. If Paul passively allowed the boasting of the false teachers and the campaign to discredit him as they were waging, the message he delivered, that is, the Gospel, would be discredited as well.

II. The Frustration with Boasting – 11:18-19

A. The Parity through Boasting – v. 18

1. Paul again clarifies his motivation – the effort to gain a hearing as the false teachers had gained.
2. He states, *“Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also.”*

3. Essentially, he is applying the principles taught in *Proverbs 26:5* to protect the Corinthians from the devastating influences of the false teachers.
4. It is the parity at the microphone to gain the ear of the Corinthian holdouts.

B. The Provision for Boasting – v. 19

1. Paul himself had been among those who boasted in their religious achievements before he was saved, having placed his confidence in his flesh.
2. In these introductory comments prior to his launching into his exceptional achievements, he scathingly and sarcastically indicates why he is going to do so.
3. He declares, *“For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly.”*
4. *“The apostle, as it were, verbally slapped the Corinthians to bring them to their senses.”¹*

III. The Forfeiture in Boasting – 11:20-21

A. The Forfeiture of Self-Respect – v. 20

1. Paul reiterates the reason for his sarcastic reprimand of the Corinthians for being so susceptible to being led astray by clearly unqualified and self-promoting false teachers – *“For you tolerate it ...”* [ἀνέχω] – to undergo something burdensome or troublesome without giving in or quitting.
2. He essentially says to them that they were not willing to defend themselves against the abuse and mistreatment by the false teachers and thereby demonstrate a lack of self-respect.

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *2 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 380.

- a) They were binding them to control them² – “... *if anyone enslaves you ...*” [καταδουλώω] – “to reduce to slavery” – Galatians 2:4.
 - b) They were bankrupting them – “... *anyone devours you ...*” [κατεσθίω] – taking every penny they could get a hold of – cp. Matthew 23:14.
 - c) They were bullying them – “... *anyone takes advantage of you ...*” [λαμβάνω] – “taking hold of someone to control it – cp. Luke 5:5.
 - d) They were belittling them – “... *anyone exalts himself ...*” [ἐπαίρω] – by claiming to be significant, the false teachers were demeaning or insulting them as insignificant by comparison to get them to do what the false teachers desired.
 - e) They were buffeting them – “... *anyone hits you in the face.*” [δέρω] – to whip or beat, and describes punitive, physical punishment for being out of line – cp. Acts 23:1-2.
3. They unnecessarily permitted all these things and failed to see the impropriety of such ungodly treatment.

B. The Forfeiture of Self-Restraint – v. 21

- 1. He continues his sarcasm, saying essentially, “I have really let you down by comparison – but I can step up my game!”
- 2. He states, “*To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison.*” – We have done none of these things to you.
- 3. But, “I can do better!” – “*But in whatever respect anyone else is bold – I speak in foolishness – I am just as bold myself.*”
- 4. Here he transitions into a defense of his apostleship by listing his credentials (according to the Corinthians’ priorities).
- 5. In his love for the Corinthians, the Gospel, and Christ Himself, Paul cannot permit the false teachers any footing or space – he will provide superlative credentials in light of which the boasting of the false teachers will pale.

Those who boast about themselves are failing to exalt Christ Jesus.

² John Phillips, [*Exploring 2 Corinthians: An Expository Commentary*](#), The John Phillips Commentary Series (Kregel Publications; WORDsearch Corp., 2009), 2 Co 11:20.