

“The Credentials of a Christlike Leader”

2 Corinthians 11:16–33

July 26, 2026

Introduction

2 Corinthians 11:16–33...

In the 2010’s, the term “humble-brag” entered the dictionary. According to Merriam-Webster, it refers to a “seemingly modest reference that is meant to draw attention to one’s admirable or impressive qualities or achievements.” However, as most of us have probably experienced, a humble-brag usually consists of 100% bragging and 0% humility.

I bring this up because perhaps, at first reading, it may appear that in this passage, Paul is giving a first-century version of a humble-brag. Some might be rubbed the wrong way by these verses. Some might question if such speech is fitting for an Apostle of Christ. It may seem like Paul is saying, “Yeah, I’m no big deal, but I have probably done and suffered more than anybody else for the gospel of Christ.”

However, I don’t think Merriam-Webster should change the date of first usage for “humble-brag” to the first century to account for this passage. This is not a humble-brag from Paul. As we consider the details of this passage, we will see clearly that we are not reading the words of an arrogant apostle. Rather, we find the credentials of a Christlike leader that he has circumstantially been forced to share for the good of others.

In 2 Corinthians 11:16–33, Paul provides two lists about the credentials of a Christlike leader.

Outline:

- I. The Reasons for Proclaiming Credentials (11:16–21)
- II. The Résumé of Proven Credentials (11:22–33)

I am praying that through this passage of His Word, God would grow in discernment to recognize and follow truly Christlike leaders, and avoid false teachers, in addition to personally as faithful servants of Christ.

So, before considering the specifics of Paul’s apostolic credentials, let’s begin by looking at *The Reasons for Proclaiming Credentials* in 11:16–21...

I. The Reasons for Proclaiming Credentials (11:16–21)

In this section, Paul lists multiple reasons why he is about to speak about his works in the ministry. And the first reason why Paul will point to his ministerial resume is that It Is Necessary. He writes, “11:16.”

A. It Is Necessary (11:16–17)

By writing, “Again I say, let no one think me foolish,” Paul is giving another reminder to the Corinthians that he is not actually a fool. In this section, he goes on to show his credentials, and normally, such a thing should be considered immature and foolish. But Paul explicitly says here he is not actually a fool. He says this to demonstrate that he knew what he was doing throughout this entire section. Paul is self-aware in this situation and understands that having to repeatedly point to himself and explain all the reasons why he should be trusted as a true apostle was silly, and he knows it.

In fact, he even goes as far as to say in the next verse that, “11:17.” See, you won’t find an example of Jesus speaking the way in which Paul is going to here. Sure, there were times where Jesus pointed to the authenticity of His messiahship. He explained why He truly was the Son of God and Savior of the world. But can you ever think of an example from the Gospels in which Jesus is bragging about Himself? I don’t think so. Therefore, Paul is saying that this type of “boasting” is not according to the way of Jesus.

So, this should lead us to ask the question: Then why does he do it? Why does Paul, the Apostle of Christ, not follow the example of Christ on this matter? If Paul understands that repeatedly pointing to oneself is arrogant foolishness, then how is it permissible for him to do so?

Well, I believe we can infer from the context that the Christlike reason/motive for him doing so was necessity. Think of the situation. There is a church being wooed away toward false apostles. These false teachers referred to themselves as “super apostles.” As v.20 says, they “exalted” themselves. They were puffing themselves up and boasting about themselves in order to draw a following. And the danger was that the Corinthians were falling for it. They were becoming influenced to follow false teachers because of the teachers' great claims about themselves.

Therefore, despite knowing that this type of speech is foolish, it was necessary for Paul to speak in such a way in order to draw them back to the truth. Look at 11:30. Paul says, “if I have to boast” or, as the CSB translates it, “if boasting is necessary.” This makes it explicit that Paul was doing this by necessity and for the good of the Corinthians. Paul willingly condescends to the level the Corinthians can understand to win back their hearts and protect them from false teachers...

The way in which Paul conducts himself reminds me of the example of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. If you haven't watched or read *The Lord of the Rings*, you are missing out, but for those of you who don't know, Aragorn is first introduced as an obscure man who has spent years traveling about. But in reality, he is the heir to the throne. But Aragorn is a humble man. He does not draw attention to himself. He is not power-hungry. He is not corrupt. But despite Aragorn's humility, he eventually goes on to openly reveal his royalty. In the story, there are multiple occasions when it was necessary for Aragorn to point to his regal credentials and defend his identity and right as king. But he never does it for arrogant reasons. He does not point to his regal credentials for the good of himself, but for the good of others. In like fashion, Paul here is not actually proud or arrogant, but he will point to his apostolic credentials because it has become necessary to do so for the good of others...

But not only has it become necessary for Paul to defend himself, but it has also been forced upon him. He writes, in 11:18, “11:18.”

B. It Has Been Forced (11:18)

The false apostles that Paul was combating were known to “boast according to the flesh.” What he means is that they would puff themselves up in the eyes of others. And when he says that this is “according to the flesh,” he means that the source of this boasting was wordliness and sin.

Paul says that since/because his was what his opponents were doing and the Corinthians were listening to it, Paul says, “I will boast also.” The grounds and motive behind what he is about to do in pointing to himself is because he has been forced to do so. In 12:11 he writes, “I have been a fool! You forced me to it” (ESV). Now, Paul isn’t sinfully blame-shifting, but rather stating that he does not want to have to make much of himself, yet he has been compelled to do so because of the situation. Paul is reluctantly entering into the foolish game the false apostles were playing in order to win the Corinthians.

But it is important to note that while Paul will reluctantly enter into the game that was being played, Paul is doing so in order to expose it. The last reason Paul gives for proclaiming his credentials is that *It Exposes the Folly* of it all. He writes, “11:19.”

C. It Exposes Folly (11:19–21)

I hope you can recognize it, but these verses are dripping with irony and sarcasm. Paul sarcastically states that it must be the Corinthians’ profound wisdom that leads them to be drawn towards the foolishness so easily. In reality, by writing this, he is ridiculing their acceptance of arrogant and abusive teachers.

Look at 11:20. Paul writes, “11:20.” What a list this is! God’s word says that these false apostles “enslaved,” meaning they forced the Corinthians into servitude under them. They “devoured,” meaning they cheated them and greedily ate up what wasn’t theirs. They “take advantage,” meaning they manipulate others in order to

take from them. They “exalt” themselves, meaning they lift up their importance and raise their rank before the eyes of others. And finally, Paul proclaims that it's like these false teachers metaphorically punch them in the face and abuse them. This is how these false teachers treated Christ's bride...

And the crazy thing is that the Corinthians “tolerate it”, meaning they accepted and received it when they were treated like this. It's like these false teachers were a roaming band of robbers, and the Corinthians open their front door and eagerly yell out the invitation, “Come on in! Please bind me up, take my stuff, take advantage of me, abuse me!”

Through this description, Paul exposes the folly of it all. The Apostle is exposing the false teachers for who they truly are. He unmasks them and shows them to be the wolves that they really are. And Paul also exposes the foolishness of the Corinthians for how they counted this mistreatment as strength.

And that note is something worth pausing on. This is a very contextually specific passage before us today. However, there are applications for the modern-day church to draw even from verses like this. We find here that Paul is rebuking the Corinthian church for “tolerating” and not properly dealing with false teachers.

Therefore, we learn this important point of application: Every church member in this room must understand that *you* have the biblical responsibility to resist false teachers. Yes, church leaders should be like Paul and do their part to protect the church. But it's not just the church leaders' job to do so! It's your job also! And in this letter, the emphasis is on the congregational responsibility to deal biblically with false teachers. Paul is writing to the church as a whole to convince them to resist these people. Therefore, I want you to know that it's the whole local church, of which you are to be an active member, that has the duty and responsibility to reject false teachers. To fail to discern and reject false teachers is a failure of a job description God has given to you...

So, understand that heretical, authoritarian, domineering, and despotic church leaders are not strong and commendable, but damnable. True Christlike leaders are not like that.

This is why Paul says what he does in v.21, “11:21a.” If that is what is considered strength in the eyes of the church of Corinth, then Paul says he was weak. Paul wasn’t like that. Paul didn’t enslave, devour, take advantage, or beat the bride of Christ.

Instead, the Apostle of Jesus Christ will seek to defend the bride of Christ by any means necessary. He continues in v.21, “11:21b.”

Paul closes here by saying that he will now launch into a further defense of his ministry. It is normally foolish to point to oneself, but due to the situation, this foolishness has been forced upon him and made it necessary to do so. So, in 11:22–33, we come to Paul’s *Résumé of Proven Credentials*.

II. The Résumé of Proven Credentials (11:22–33)

Depending on how exactly you number it, this section contains roughly 30 different elements that Paul points to in order to defend the authenticity of his ministry. But these roughly 30 different elements can be divided into four general categories.

First, in 11:22, he will start with a point that I’ll call *A Leveling Lineage*. Look at 11:22. He writes, “11:22.”

A. Leveling Lineage (11:22)

Together these terms speak comprehensively to the ethnic, linguistic, covenantal, national, and religious dimensions of being Jewish. And it is clear from this verse that the false teachers in Corinth were of a Jewish heritage, and they were proudly making a big deal out of this point.

Personally, I am a Gentile through and through. My mom’s side is Irish, and my dad’s side is Dutch. And one statement that I heard from my dad’s side of the family growing up was: “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much.” (And all the Dutch in the room say, Amen!) And while that statement was said lightheartedly, that

actually was the sentiment that the Jews generally had. These false apostles were saying, “If you ain’t Jewish, you ain’t much.”

And likely they made a big deal about this point because of Israel's rich history as the covenantal people of God and because the 12 disciples were Jewish. Therefore, they weaponized this to help grow their following.

However, this boast of theirs would not work against the Apostle Paul. Were they ethnic Jews who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic? So was Paul. Were they nationally identified as Israelites? So was Paul. Were they physical descendants and offspring of Abraham and therefore heirs to the covenantal promises given to Abraham? So was Paul.

This is why I called this point *A Leveling Lineage*. Notice how he repeats the phrase “So am I.” Paul is leveling the field here. Imagine a scale. It was like the false teachers were placing their Jewish heritage on the scale in order to tilt things in their favor, and seeing this, Paul matches them by placing his impeccable Jewish lineage in order to balance the scales.

Now, Paul wasn’t actually arrogant about his Jewish credentials. In Philippians 3:8, he refers to them as “rubbish,” a term used to describe manure or worthless trash. However, he decides to insert his Israelite lineage as the first item on his list of credentials in order to cut off any advantage these false teachers might try to use...

But as we come to 11:23–27, we will see the second category of Paul’s list of proven credentials. He writes, “11:23.”

B. Superior Sacrifice (11:23–27)

So, with his equality established in v.22, Paul now goes on to demonstrate his superiority. In v.22, to the question: “Are they Jewish?” he said, “So I am.” But now in v.23, to the question “Are they servants of Christ?” he says, “I more so.”

Paul proclaims he is a superior servant of Christ. Again, Paul reiterates how foolish this entire thing is. He says, “I speak as if insane.” Paul acknowledges that such a statement would normally be a crazy/deranged thing to come off one’s lips, but it must be said in this situation. He was superior to them.

But what will he point to in order to demonstrate his superiority? It’s a reason you might not expect... He says it’s his *Superior Sacrifice*. He writes, “11:23b.”

The reality is that the false apostles were not servants of Christ at all. And in reality within the true body of Christ, nobody is any higher or better than anybody else because we all find our standing “in Christ.” However, it is true that Paul was driven to willingly make personal sacrifices in order to bring glory to the Savior he served.

Paul’s authenticity is evidenced “in far more labors,” meaning he engaged in a greater degree of wearisome work, toil, and exertion. It is evidenced “in far more imprisonments,” meaning he experienced a higher number of persecutions that landed him in prison. It is evidenced by being “beaten times without number,” meaning he couldn’t even keep count of all the times he suffered strikes for the sake of Christ. And it is evidenced by how he was “often in danger of death.” Translated more literally, it means he was “in deaths more often,” meaning that he experienced far more near-death experiences during his ministry...

But to prove his point, he doesn’t just speak in generalities; he spells out the details.

“Five times [he] received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes” (11:24). This was the maximum beating penalty that could be given. One commentator explains this penalty as follows: “The minister of the synagogue was to stand on a raised stone inflicting the blows ‘with all his might,’ using a redoubled calf strap, to which two other straps were attached. Thirteen blows were delivered to the chest and twenty-six to the back” (Barnett, NICNT, 542). Basically, on five different instances and related to his testimony for Christ, the Jews nearly beat Paul to death.

“Three times [he] was beaten with rods” (11:25). These beatings were from the hands of Gentiles. Paul was struck repeatedly with rods, staffs, and sticks.

“Once [he] was stoned” (11:25). This event is described in Acts 14:19, which describes how a group of Jews “persuaded the multitudes, [and] they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead” (NKJV). Paul was pelted by an angry mob with rocks until they thought he was dead, and they dragged him like a corpse and threw him out of the city. Only by God’s sovereign sustaining hand did he survive.

“Three times [he] was shipwrecked,” and he has spent “a night and a day... in the deep” (11:25). Imagine being on a boat; it crashes, begins to sink, and you are then forced off of it into the depths of the ocean, and you have to swim or hold onto some part of the broken boat to survive. That happened to Paul on three separate occasions. And in one instance, you could have found Paul somewhere in the middle of the sea swimming or holding onto something for nearly 24 hours. Imagine spending all night and then all day like that...

But not only that, he adds in 11:26 that he had “been on frequent journeys” and experienced constant danger. The word danger is repeated eight times in this verse. He experienced environmental dangers “from rivers.” He experienced economic and physical dangers “from robbers.” He experienced danger from his “countrymen” (meaning the Jews) and danger “from the Gentiles.” He sometimes experienced danger “in the city” while in bustling metropolises. He sometimes experienced danger “in the wilderness” and “on the sea” while in the middle of nowhere, either on land or ocean. And lastly, 11:26 says he experienced danger “among false brethren,” meaning he suffered from the threat of persecution that came from those within the visible church, but who were actually fake Christians.

He continues this list of sufferings in v.27, and he writes, “11:27.” With these elements also added, it is hard to think of any external suffering that Paul did not experience. In Paul’s life, he was baptized into suffering.

But while we can get carried away in discussing all the details of this list, let us make sure we don’t miss the forest for the trees. Let’s remember Paul’s overall

point here. The Apostle is writing this entire section to defend his ministry.

Particularly, he is writing these verses to make evident this important point: the status as a true servant of Christ is evidenced by their willingness to suffer and sacrifice for the gospel of Christ and the church of Christ. Not every Christlike leader will go through the same things that Paul did. However, every Christlike leader will sacrifice for the flock. They will work hard. They will endure hardship. They will suffer little sleep. They will accept persecution, whether small or great. And they will keep on serving. Why? Because in the words of v.23, “they are servants of Christ.”

And when they sign up for service to Christ, they know the cost. A leader who is unwilling to endure difficulty is not like Paul. Somebody in search of an easy desk job isn’t fit for the ministry. Because true leaders and servants of Christ want to bring glory to the Master whom they serve, and therefore, they will sacrifice. You will know them by the price they are willing to pay, not for selfish reasons, but in order to serve the saints until the day they stand before their Savior...

This is the point that the Corinthians needed to know and what we need to know. It is vitally important that all Christians are able to discern between shepherds and wolves, between true and false leaders. And one of the clearest credentials of a Christlike leader is that he is willing to sacrifice for the gospel and the good of others.

But there is another element to Paul’s resume in this passage. We come to the third category of this list in vs.28–29. Here we see Paul’s Caring Concern. He writes, “11:28–29.”

C. Caring Concern (11:28–29)

The phrase “apart from such external things” could be more helpfully translated “apart from the things unmentioned.” Meaning that there were even more things that could have been included in the list in vs. 23–27. However, disregarding everything else that he could have added, he now says another thing that proves his credentials as an Apostle of Christ: his care and concern.

Paul shares that he felt a “daily pressure” due to his “*concern* for all the churches.” This term “concerned” in the Greek is a compound word that combines the word for “mind” and the word for “dividing”/“tearing.” You have a divided mind. Your thought life is like constantly clicking back and forth between two TV channels. Your thoughts keep on returning to a certain thing while you are trying to go about your day.

That is what Paul felt. Once again, Paul opens his heart here in a very personal manner and shares that he felt daily pressure, had a genuine concern for the welfare of the saints, and regularly returned to thinking about and praying for them.

He continues in v.29, writing, “11:29.” Again, we see that Paul has a pastor’s heart. When others are spiritually weak, he feels that weakness with them. When the saints weep, he weeps with them. And when the saints are led astray and into sin, he has “intense concern.” The word translated here as “concern” is a different Greek word than v.28, and the word here literally means that he “burns.” Paul is righteously angry and jealous when the saints are led into sin by these false teachers...

Now, remember that this passage is about the credentials of a truly Christlike leader. So, do you want to know who truly biblical leaders are? Is it based on charisma? Popularity? Theological degrees? How many books they’ve written?

No. It is none of those things. Rather, **this is how you will identify Christlike leaders: they are those who have a deep care and godly concern for the good of God’s people.** This verse evidences Paul’s deep care and godly concern for every Christian in all the churches he had ministered to. Do not judge ministries or ministers based merely on giftedness of language, but on genuineness of love. Paul and all true ministers after him have a shepherd's heart...

But there is one last category in Paul’s list of credentials in his apostolic resume that we find in vs.30–33. In these verses, the Apostle says that he should be known as true by his *Willful Weakness*. He writes, “11:30.”

D. Willful Weakness (11:30–33)

Paul both begins and ends our passage this morning by stating his reluctance to participate in pointing to himself. Again, understand that he is only doing this because he has been forced into it and it has become necessary for the good of the Corinthians to do so.

However, despite reluctantly joining the game the false teachers have been playing, he does so to flip it on its head. He inverts the entire paradigm. The false teachers have been consistently boasting in themselves. And he says, “Do I have to boast? Ok. I’ll boast. But I will boast not of my strength, but of my weakness.”

Following v.30, Paul then gives an example from his life to illustrate this point about his weakness. He writes, “11:31–33.”

It may seem odd for him to end on such a story. He has been listing all of these things, and it seems to be reaching an apex and crescendo, and he even proclaims an oath. And then the chapter ends with Paul saying, “One time... I was in a basket.” And you might be thinking, really? That’s such an anti-climactic ending. Where’s the triumph? Where are the miracles? Why would Paul end on such a story? Why does it end with Paul running for his life and being completely at the help of others as he is lowered down in what was likely a smelly ol’ fish basket in the middle of the night?

Well, this incident refers back to the start of Paul’s Christian life as recorded in Acts 9. After being confronted by Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul is radically converted. Then Acts 9:20 says that “immediately [Paul] preached the Christ in the synagogues that He is the Son of God.” And after some days had passed, Paul will go on to receive his first instance of persecution for Christ as a group of “the Jews plotted to kill him” (9:23). The only way for him to avoid these Jews and the Gentile guards that then got involved was that some disciples “took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket” (9:25).

Therefore, I believe he ends this chapter by pointing to this event because it really stands as a paradigm for his life and ministry (Hughes, *2 Corinthians*, 207). Paul purposefully paints this picture of himself. **He ends this chapter by willingly**

focusing on his weakness. And he does so because Christlike leaders know that they are nothing and Christ is everything. They know that they are lowly servants of their exalted Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not seek to make much of themselves, but much of Christ...

Conclusion

These are *The Credentials of a Christlike Leader*. In this passage, Paul wishes he didn't have to speak of himself at all. But he was forced to do so in order to expose the folly of it all and rescue the Corinthians from wolves. He reluctantly enters into the game the false teachers were playing, but while doing so flips the paradigm of greatness on its head. Christlike leadership is about skill, but sacrifice. It isn't about celebrities, but caring concern. It isn't about human strength, but Christ's strength shown through human weakness.

But while this passage is focused on the trustworthiness of the Apostle Paul, it is not meant to end there. That is because Paul only defends his ministry in order to gain a beachhead to proclaim the excellencies of Christ. It would miss the point if we only talked about Paul and not about the Christ whom he served.

While Paul's love, sacrifice, and humility are commendable, it is nothing to be compared to the love, sacrifice, and humility of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we can appreciate Paul's humility seen in being lowered down in a basket, that pales in comparison to Jesus' humility, who, being the eternal Son of God, was lowered down from heaven, became a lowly man, and was born in a lowly manger. We can applaud Paul's love and sacrifice, but nothing can compare to Christ, who "loved you and gave Himself up for [you], an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma" (Ephesians 5:2).

What the Apostle Paul would want most this morning is for you to know that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and Savior of the world. He'd want you to know that while he considered himself the "chief of sinners," we are all sinners who need to be rescued from it. He'd want you to know that we are all naturally "dead in sins and trespasses" and under the wrath of God, and that if you do not turn from your

sin, you will perish for an eternity in hell separated from God. But he'd want you to know that Christ died on the cross and paid the penalty for all your sin, so that you may be forgiven by God and receive eternal life if you will repent of your sins, believe in what Christ has done, and confess Him as Lord.