

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. 2 Corinthians 11:16 The false teachers were probably calling Paul a fool. Paul is saying the Corinthians should not accept that judgment. After all, Jesus said that to call a person a fool puts us in danger of the judgment (Matthew 5:22ⁱ). But if you think he is a fool, then let him act a little foolish by comparing his resume with theirs. If that is how they judge them as being superior to Paul, then compare what they boast in with who Paul is. *He is warning the Corinthians that he is utterly serious, while admitting that he is about to don the guise of a fool.*ⁱⁱ

Paul had probably never shared his credentials with them, relying solely on the power of the cross. He was focused on communicating the gospel, not his past accomplishments. For Paul, it was all about Jesus' cross and resurrection (1 Corinthians 2:2ⁱⁱⁱ). May God give us the same passion! However, since the false teachers were undermining that pure message, Paul felt it necessary to win over those who were influenced by the false teachers' worldly standards by comparing those very standards with some of his own history. *This serves to protect Paul's character while indicting the character of his rivals, who engage in such practices unapologetically.*^{iv}

God's choice of Paul was very tactical. Before his conversion he had passion and sincerity that were misguided. He also had the respect of his fellow Jews. His conversion upset the Jewish leadership and his effectiveness in winning the diaspora to Christ was so successful that they plotted to kill him. We do not know if these detractors in Corinth were Judaizers or just out to gain followers and money, but whichever, they felt they had to put Paul down to gain the congregation's loyalty.

¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. 2 Corinthians 11:17,18 Boasting in what God has brought us through and how He has worked in our lives and thereby drawing attention to our self is not what God would normally have us do. It is foolish to use the world's standards. But Paul is passionate about this congregation he had led to the Lord and wants to present them as a pure virgin to Christ, not as a bride who has been led astray to other affections (11:2,3^v).

Paul wrote to the Romans, *³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* Romans 12:3 We should recognize that without Jesus in our lives, we could never be righteous or accomplish anything of real worth. That is genuine humility. On the other hand, we should not deny what God has done in and through us. That is a sober judgment. If God has given us faith and accomplished things through us, we should acknowledge that with gratitude and give God all the glory. To not do so is to hide your light under a bushel and refuse to let others see how gracious God has been to us. We have this fine line between pride that boasts in our accomplishments and on the other hand wanting people to know the grace that is ours and has produced lasting fruit in our lives, which is our testimony.

¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 2 Corinthians 11:19 Paul writes this with stinging sarcasm. This verse is like a slap in the face to get them to re-evaluate themselves, their attitude toward Paul, and toward the false teachers.

In his first letter to them he tried to tell them they were not as wise as they thought (1 Corinthians 1:26^{vi}). In the same letter (3:18^{vii}), he warned them not to deceive themselves into thinking that they had the wisdom of this age, but instead humble themselves so they could become wise. He slams their self-perceived wisdom in 4:10^{viii} by saying Paul and his team are fools, while the Corinthians are so wise (2 Corinthians 11:19^{ix}). Apparently, the false teachers were using the Corinthians' egos to manipulate them. Paul states that these men that they think are so wise are fools in God's eyes.

We can easily make the same mistake. If someone comes into town and looks sharp and speaks impressively with some "new" revelation or method in which we can be "more successful," they find a lot of itching ears (2 Timothy 4:3^x). Of course, they claim, "It is all for the glory of God. But be sure to give me your email address so that I can send you requests for donations and tell you what a great work I am doing." God sees the heart. We can see the fruits in time. As Paul said, "Do not be deceived" (Galatians 6:7^{xi})!

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. ^{21a} To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! 2 Corinthians 11:20,21a This verse gives us five descriptions of the false teachers. They made slaves of the Corinthians. This implies they were domineering and used bullying tactics to get the hearers to submit to their teaching. Devour means they exploited them for financial gain. Taking advantage of them is probably also regarding financial gain but maybe forms of servitude as well. To "put on airs" is to make themselves more important sounding and impressive than they really are. Striking them may be literal but is more likely their harsh rebukes to those who do not submit to their teaching.

We rarely see this kind of bold behavior in our day, though I have witnessed it in both evangelical and charismatic churches. Most churches in our culture go to the other extreme of trying to please everyone. That harsh teaching style was common at the time among the Sophists. The false teachers may have taken a lesson from them as to how to convey oneself so boldly as to demand the respect and even subservience of the humble. Paul had displayed just the opposite in his manner and style of teaching. The contrast was meant to open their eyes to who truly cared about them.

"*We were too weak for that,*" is also written in a sarcastic tone. They would never dream of Paul treating them like that. It made the contrast stand out. **He is taking their accusation of being weak and making it into a path of real strength.** He will completely redefine weakness in this chapter and on through chapter 13.

John warns us in 1 John 4:1^{xii} to not believe every spirit but to test the spirits. We should be careful to see that what they are teaching lines up with the Word of God. The telltale signs of a false teacher are the constant reminder of their credentials or training and their insistence on financial matters that will benefit himself.

Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22^{xiii} to test prophecies, to cling to the good and reject the evil. That is also done by comparing what is said with what the Word of God declares. This is why it is essential that believers know their Bible. Not only does it keep us on track and help us recognize what is deceptive, but it helps us to protect other sheep from the wolves (Matthew 7:15^{xiv}).

This is very personal to me as I was led astray when I was young. The false teacher had a deceptive form of humility, but in the end wanted his followers to recognize him as our spiritual leader. He spoke highly of Jesus, but he was our interpreter of what

Jesus was saying to us in our day. Sheep like a strong leader. They feel safe when someone seems authoritative and strong. But when they rely on the person to hear from God rather than the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, they have moved away from that pure and sincere devotion to Christ (11:3^{xv}).

^{21b} But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. 2 Corinthians 11:21b Paul starts this next section by reminding his readers that this is not how the Lord would respond. We do not compare ourselves with others (10:12^{xvi}). The Lord Himself is the standard. It is foolish to compare ourselves with anyone else. But since the Corinthians are so taken with the false teachers' charisma and self-congratulatory oratory, he will bring himself down to their level and speak as they would. He does this not to elevate himself in the eyes of the congregation, but to demonstrate that the false teachers' worldly standards do not even compare to his. He does this in the hope of opening their eyes to the true spiritual condition of these false teachers. Announcing beforehand that this type of comparison is foolish and worldly serves to protect Paul's character while exposing that of his rivals who do so without a second thought.

²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. 2 Corinthians 11:22 This verse lets us know that the false teachers were of Jewish descent. Considering their Greek Sophist like methods, my guess would be that they were from the diaspora just as Paul was, meaning that they were born outside of Palestine. Hebrew, Israelites, and Abraham's descendants all amount to the same thing. They had Jewish lineage and could claim to be from one of the tribes of Israel. Paul is claiming to be just as Jewish as they were. That was important in the early church as the Jews knew the character of God from the Old Testament. Since Jesus said He was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:44^{xvii}), that is how the early church presented Jesus as the promised Messiah who had come to reverse the curse that came from the fall of Adam and Eve (Galatians 3:13^{xviii}).

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. 2 Corinthians 11:23 The false teachers claimed to be servants of Christ. Paul declares himself to be a better one, at the risk of sounding prideful, which for followers of Christ is not something we would normally do. However, he must expose these people that he said in 11:13,14^{xix} were masquerading as servants of Christ for their own advantage.

In verse 23b-29 Paul proves he is a better servant of Christ by a method often used by the Stoics of his day. Stoics would prove their devotion to stoicism by listing all the things they had endured. He starts by saying he works harder than they do. The Corinthians had witnessed how hard Paul labored for a year and a half. Those who are in it for their own benefit will try to work as little as possible. They do not see their work as a God given assignment and fulfill it out of love for God who called them by grace.

Paul's second claim to superiority as a servant was the fact that he was beaten countless times. He tells Timothy that all who a godly life in Christ will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12^{xx}). These beatings were efforts to keep him from proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Many Jews believed, as Paul once did, that Jesus was a false messiah. They could not understand how His crucifixion was for their salvation. They only saw it as proof that He was a fraud (Deuteronomy 21:23^{xxi}). Jesus taught His disciples that the time

would come when people thought that to kill them would be an act of service to God (John 16:2^{xxii}). Paul counted persecution as a sign being a servant of God.

Paul goes on to write, “often near death.” I am not sure if that means beaten to the point of death, or other situations such as being near starvation. The point is that he was willing to serve even if it meant dying for Jesus. Surely the church did not see that kind of commitment in the false teachers.

²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 2

Corinthians 11:24 Paul tells us this scourging was from the Jews. The Mishnah describes exactly how this was to be carried out. *One ties his two hands on either side of a pillar, and the minister of the community grabs his clothing—if it is torn, it is torn, and if it is ripped to pieces, it is ripped to pieces—until he bares his chest. A stone is set down behind him, on which the minister of the community stands. And a strap of cowhide is in his hand, doubled and redoubled, with two straps that rise and fall [fastened] to it. ... And he who hits him hits with one hand, with all his might.* (m. Makkot 3:12-14).^{xxiii} The 39 lashes were designated because the Law forbade more than 40 (Deuteronomy 25:2,3^{xxiv}).

Paul’s back must have been covered in scars from the five times when this was inflicted upon him. This is the only place Paul mentions this horrible punishment, though he does write that he bore in his body scars for the sake of Christ (Galatians 6:17^{xxv}). He did not even mention it in his letters and Luke did not mention it in Acts. The lashings probably occurred because of his outreach to synagogues.

²⁵ 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; 2 Corinthians 11:25 We know he was beaten with rods in Philippi, which turned out to his advantage when he told them he was a Roman (Acts 16:22-25^{xxvi}). The magistrates could have been in serious trouble if Rome found out they did that to a Roman citizen. We do not know the other two times. The passage says that the crowd joined in attacking them and the beating was with many blows. Paul and Silas, in the Philippi prison with feet bound in stocks, did what Jesus suggested; they rejoiced in songs of praise that they were among the prophets who were persecuted for their faith (Matthew 5:10-12^{xxvii}).

The worst of all the things Paul mentioned was stoning. It was the Jewish form of corporal punishment when a person blasphemed God. Before his conversion, Paul, then called Saul, oversaw the stoning of the deacon Stephen (Acts 7:58^{xxviii}). It was in Lystra that the crowd turned from worshiping Paul to stoning him. This was a Greco-Roman stoning and apparently unlike Jewish stoning it did not end with crushing his head with a large stone. However, he was dragged out of the city, left for dead, and very likely did die. God raised him up, and as crazy as it sounds, he went back into the city (Acts 14:19,20^{xxix}).

Paul experienced three shipwrecks, one of which caused him to be a night and a day floating in the sea. When navy men in World War II were rescued after being that long in the ocean, the rescuers had to be careful not pull the skin off the arms of the men as the raised them out of the water. We only have record of one of those shipwrecks on the island of Malta when he was being taken as a prisoner to Rome (Acts 27:41-44^{xxx}). That happened after this letter was written and resulted in the island of Malta being evangelized.

²⁶ on 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; 2 Corinthians 11:26 Paul moves from the deadliest incidents to the daily threats he faced. In that day, many travelers were robbed and beaten. Crossing rivers without bridges could cause you to be swept away. Jews saw Paul as blasphemer and followed him from town to town to encourage locals to attack him and his team. We do not know exactly what false brothers implies, but it could mean some who were pretending to be believers to spy on them and report to the Jews for financial reward.

²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 2 Corinthians 11:27 Despite all that he endured, he worked tirelessly through all the difficulties and accusations. This probably refers to working to make ends meet through leather crafting. He uses the same expression in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:9^{xxxix}). He had sleepless nights, probably laboring through the night supporting himself or in prayer for the congregations or concerned about an imminent attack. At times there was a lack of food and water. He could have died of exposure numerous times. All these difficulties are the fulfillment of what God had told Ananias shortly after Paul's conversion. *"I will show him how much he will suffer for my name"* (Acts 9:15,16^{xxxix}).

²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? 2 Corinthians 11:28,29 Pastor means shepherd. Jesus told us a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:15^{xxxix}). That does not only mean to be willing to die defending them, but daily giving up one's own desires to serve those who are struggling and to prepare to feed the flock with the undiluted Word of God. Concern for the welfare of the flock is always with a pastor. We are always on the lookout for false teaching, always ready to correct any concepts that do not line up with God's Word.

When someone stumbles, we want to be there to encourage them not to give in to condemnation, but to fall forward. We want to encourage and support the weak knowing that they are targeted by the lion who is waiting to devour (1 Peter 5:8^{xxxix}). We are indignant toward those who would draw people away from the truth.

All of these descriptions are Paul contrasting himself with the false shepherds, who as Jesus taught in John 10, run away when they see the wolf coming. They are thieves and robbers who kill, steal, and destroy (John 10:8^{xxxv},10^{xxxvi}).

This account is the most detailed record in Scripture of the things that Paul endured, but it is only a little over halfway through his ministry. My personal take away is, **"No whining!"** If Paul endured all this because of his love for the Lord, what are my little trials by comparison? Nothing! My back is not scared. I do not have people following me around to harass and threaten me or stir up people to throw me out of the city. I have never been beaten or had my life threatened. I know people who have in the third world and in Israel, but they carry on. I am humbled by what they endure to share the gospel and be faithful to our Lord.

When persecution comes, and it will come, will you stand like Paul did, leaning on our Lord to see us through? Count the little annoyances we endure now as nothing! We must be careful that comfort does not override our passion to serve our King.

Questions:

1 Why was Paul engaged in foolish boasting?

- 2 How does Romans 12:3 apply to this?
- 3 What causes man to be susceptible to false teachers? (19-21a)
- 4 What are five descriptions of false teachers in 20,21a?
- 5 What evidence did Paul give of being a better servant? (23)
- 6 What troubles of Paul are only mentioned in 23-29?
- 7 How did Jesus warn of coming persecution?
- 8 What were some of the daily threats he faced? (26,27)
- 9 What was the prediction God gave to Ananias?
- 10 What was the emotional cost?
- 11 What is your take away from this account?

ⁱ **Matthew 5:22 (ESV)**

²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

ⁱⁱ Moyer V. Hubbard, [2 Corinthians](#), ed. Mark L. Strauss, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 189.

ⁱⁱⁱ **1 Corinthians 2:2 (ESV)**

² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

^{iv} Moyer V. Hubbard, [2 Corinthians](#), ed. Mark L. Strauss, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 190

^v **2 Corinthians 11:2-3 (ESV)**

² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

^{vi} **1 Corinthians 1:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

^{vii} **1 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

^{viii} **1 Corinthians 4:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.

^{ix} **2 Corinthians 11:19 (ESV)**

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

^x **2 Timothy 4:3 (ESV)**

³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,

^{xi} **Galatians 6:7 (ESV)**

⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

^{xii} **1 John 4:1 (ESV)**

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

^{xiii} **1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

^{xiv} **Matthew 7:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

^{xv} **2 Corinthians 11:3 (ESV)**

³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

^{xvi} **2 Corinthians 10:12 (ESV)**

¹² Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But

when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

^{xvii} **Luke 24:44 (ESV)**

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

^{xviii} **Galatians 3:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—

^{xix} **2 Corinthians 11:13-14 (ESV)**

¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

^{xx} **2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)**

¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

^{xxi} **Deuteronomy 21:23 (ESV)**

²³ his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

^{xxii} **John 16:2 (ESV)**

² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.

^{xxiii} Moyer V. Hubbard, *2 Corinthians*, ed. Mark L. Strauss, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 195

^{xxiv} **Deuteronomy 25:2-3 (ESV)**

² then if the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down and be beaten in his presence with a number of stripes in proportion to his offense. ³ Forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight.

^{xxv} **Galatians 6:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

^{xxvi} **Acts 16:22-25 (ESV)**

²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,

^{xxvii} **Matthew 5:10-12 (ESV)**

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

^{xxviii} **Acts 7:58 (ESV)**

⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

^{xxix} **Acts 14:19-20 (ESV)**

¹⁹ But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ²⁰ But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

^{xxx} **Acts 27:41-44 (ESV)**

⁴¹ But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. ⁴² The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. ⁴³ But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴ and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

^{xxxi} **1 Thessalonians 2:9 (ESV)**

⁹ For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

^{xxxii} **Acts 9:15-16 (ESV)**

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. ¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

^{xxxiii} **John 10:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

^{xxxiv} **1 Peter 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

^{xxxv} **John 10:8 (ESV)**

⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.

^{xxxvi} **John 10:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.