

“It Is No Surprise”

The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

Texts: 2 Corinthians 11:1-15; Genesis 3:1-13

It is not a matter of if, but when. False teachers will come. They have *already* come. It was evitable. If we know our Bibles, this should be no surprise to us that this happens. The introduction of false doctrine is just one of the areas where Satan seeks to undermine the cause of Christ. Because we tend to idealize the apostolic era, it is hard for us to believe that false teachers established a significant foothold in a church recently established through the efforts of an apostle, who most of the members of this church knew personally, who had taught them the truths of the Christian faith, and who remained in frequent contact with them through visits, letters, and various emissaries. But it actually happened in Corinth and we can read about it in the New Testament. Paul minces no words whatsoever when he explains to the Corinthians why such a thing has happened. His words to the Corinthians should serve as a warning to us about the inevitability of false apostles and false gospels in our midst.

As we continue our series on select passages in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we come to chapters 10-11 and Paul’s discussion of those men undermining his ministry and the truth of the gospel, men whom Paul identifies as false apostles, or even as “super-apostles.” There is a long history behind Paul’s comments recorded in these chapters, and we have spent a fair bit of time discussing Paul’s relationship to the church in Corinth throughout our study of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

The issues can be summarized as follows. Most people in the Corinthian church were new Christians in a city dominated by paganism. After helping to establish the church in Corinth and spending some significant time in their midst, Paul left the area to fulfill his missionary calling. He was in Ephesus (across the Aegean Sea) when he got word from Chloe’s family about all the troubles which arose in the Corinthian church after he left. Paul had also received a letter from the Corinthians asking him a number of questions about things he had taught them. Paul’s response is the letter we know as First Corinthians. But even with precise instructions from an apostle in hand, things in Corinth went from bad to worse.

So, Paul sent Timothy to Corinth. But Timothy brought back to Paul news about a serious issue which had arisen in the church after Paul’s departure. A group of men claiming to have apostolic authority were now openly challenging Paul’s authority in the church. They complained about Paul’s preaching—he was boring and not skilled in the flowery Greek rhetorical style which first-century audiences loved so much. Furthermore, these men were arguing that Paul was weak and unimpressive in person—the result of the hardship of travel, and the effects on his body from the beatings and persecutions Paul had endured on a number of occasions. So, Paul made what he describes as a “difficult journey” to Corinth, and then followed up by sending what is known as the “harsh letter”—a letter which is now lost to us. All this was done to respond to the issues arising in the Corinthian church after Paul’s departure.

In the chapters 1-9 of 2 Corinthians, Paul writes in light of a good report he had just received from Titus about the offering being taken for the poor in Jerusalem (our subject last time), and that the church disciplined those who were causing division within the church. But beginning in chapter 10, Paul’s tone changes dramatically. The apostle now speaks very directly to the Corinthians about a group of false teachers whom the Corinthians were tolerating in their midst. While many New Testament scholars see chapters 10-13 as yet another letter from Paul (“third, or even “fourth” Corinthians) which was attached to chapters 1-9 of 2 Corinthians, I think it more plausible that after completing the first portion of this letter (2 Corinthians, chapters 1-9), Paul received a very discouraging report from Corinth. Chapters 10-

13, which conclude 2 Corinthians, reflect this new situation. Paul now warns the Corinthians not to tolerate these men in their midst, because they are false apostles doing the devil's work.

There is nothing in 1 Corinthians to indicate that there was any controversy about the gospel itself, as the controversies addressed in Paul's first letter centered around the application of that gospel to those in Corinth struggling to leave Greco-Roman paganism behind. But in the closing chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul addresses the presence of false teachers in the Corinthian church. These men took advantage of Paul's absence and were doing great harm to the church.

So, we turn first to verses 1-7 of chapter 10, of 2 Corinthians, which includes Paul's defense of his apostolic office, before we take up his stern warning about false apostles in chapter 11:1-15. The solemn declaration which opens chapter 10 begins a new section of the letter, which runs all the way to the close in chapter 13. As I mentioned, there is a sharp break in tone with what has gone before. "*I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!*" Paul also does two things in 2 Corinthians 10:1. The first thing he does is to remind the Corinthians of the meekness and gentleness of Jesus Christ, who has not yet brought down his wrath upon the Corinthian church. Just because Jesus is meek and gentle (his patience with the Corinthians is implied) does not give the Corinthians an excuse to act as though Christ's judgment will never befall them. On the contrary, unless the church deals with the false teachers, the Lord of the church will deal with them through the ministry of Paul, who has been given his authority to do this by none other than Jesus Christ himself.

Second, Paul also refers to the accusation being made against him by his opponents. To paraphrase the argument of the false apostles who are undermining his authority, "Paul is nothing in person. He only makes threats in writing, while he is absent, and safely away from confronting people face to face." And so Paul responds to this charge by reminding the Corinthians that this is not the case. "*I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh.*"

Paul knows the issue here goes much deeper than name-calling and arguments about who has authority in the Corinthian church, and who doesn't. Although the false teachers don't understand the issue, Paul does. This is a contrast between Christian ways of thinking and doing and pagan ways of thinking and doing. It is a dispute about what is preached, as well as how it is preached. As Paul will go on to say in chapter 11, this dispute is in reality a struggle between Jesus Christ and efforts of Satan to undermine the gospel and the ministry of the church to sinners. This is a spiritual battle between Jesus Christ and his self-revelation in the gospel (the power of the proclamation of Christ crucified for sinners), and that way of thinking and doing which seems right to us and which is actually quite common to both Greco-Roman pagans and modern Americans. Those who don't understand the mission of the church and the nature of the gospel, mistakenly think that Christianity is about morals; turning bad people into good people, and making good people better. Since the preaching of Christ crucified offends people interested in being better people, the false teachers want to remove the offense of the cross.

Paul begins to make this case in verse 3 when he says, "*for though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.*" To understand Paul's point we need to understand how Paul uses the term "flesh." Paul uses the word "sarx" (flesh) in the sense of those ultimate standards which determine how we think and act.¹ The "flesh" is not a reference to our physical bodies (i.e. that we have "fleshly"

¹ Martin, 2 Corinthians, 304-305.

or human existence), but to the fact that we, as Christians, live in the midst of a fallen world filled with non-Christian ways of thinking and doing.

Because we are Christians, we should understand that this is the case. We cannot resort to combat against unbelief and false teaching using the categories of the non-Christians around us. The issue is spiritual—it stems from God’s self revelation. This is not a matter of popularity, control of the resources of the church, or how to achieve success. Paul doesn’t threaten the false teachers with a lawsuit or a restraining order to make them stop. Paul does not threaten to send Vito (the 6' 8" former gladiator who is now a Christian) to Corinth to pound some sense into them. Instead he sends two pastors (Timothy and Titus) to give instructions and offer correction. And Paul does warn the false teachers that they are no match for the power of Jesus Christ who is Lord of his church.

Paul spells this out in verses 4-6, “*For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.*” These verses have become a mantra of sorts for a Reformed apologetic method (presuppositionalism) which attacks the foundation of unbelief by relying upon the power of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the truth of the gospel, and to expose the fallacy of unbelief. In context of 2 Corinthians and the debate about Paul’s authority, these comments specifically refer to Paul’s spiritual combat with those seeking to introduce false teaching in the church. The false teachers have nothing to offer but lofty opinions, and they will be punished for their disobedience.

As Paul says in Romans 1:18, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks of divine power which destroys “strongholds.” He is using a military metaphor for a deeply entrenched intellectual commitment to paganism. In other words, the stronghold is the pagan world and life view associated with the flesh. Those who oppose God’s ways of thinking and doing inevitably find themselves up against the very power of God. The false teachers may think Paul is weak and a poor preacher—which he may very well have been. But because they use pagan categories, they mistakenly think that their charismatic personalities and finely-honed rhetorical skills will bring better success than Paul had in a Greco-Roman environment like Corinth. And since they think they are better suited for the job, they assume that they should have more authority in the church than Paul. Sadly, they are greatly mistaken, and cannot yet see how far short this kind of thinking falls.

After making the case that he is focused upon building up rather than tearing down (v. 8) and that even though he is not present in Corinth this is because Jesus himself has sent Paul to preach the gospel elsewhere so that he cannot be in Corinth (v. 16), Paul reminds the Corinthians that what matters is not how they commend themselves to the Corinthians in Paul’s absence, but whether or not they are commended by the Lord (v. 18). Paul has that commendation, the false teachers do not.

This brings us to the opening verse of chapter 11. Paul, using irony (if not sarcasm) to make a point writes, “*I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!*” Paul is using a technical expression from Jewish wisdom literature to respond to the false apostles.² In Jewish thought, “foolishness” is the opposite of wisdom. Echoing his comments in 1 Corinthians, when Paul pointed out that the cross of Jesus Christ is considered foolishness by the pagans, yet is the manifestation of the wisdom of God, Paul is in effect saying to his readers, “indulge me in a little foolishness.” “If you think what I am doing is foolish, let me explain myself to you.”

² Martin, 2 Corinthians, 331-332.

In an important sense, Paul is the spiritual father of the Corinthian church. It was his preaching of Christ crucified in this city which established the Corinthian congregation. So, as he says in verse 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.”* Paul speaks of the Corinthian church as his own daughter, now being presented to her bridegroom (Jesus Christ). In Jewish culture, once the betrothal had been arranged by the future bride and groom’s family, it was the father’s legal responsibility to ensure that his daughter remained a virgin until the time of the wedding. As the apostle to Gentiles, and as the “spiritual father” of the Corinthian church, since he first preached the gospel to the Corinthians and they came to faith in Jesus Christ through that preaching, the Corinthians were, in a sense betrothed to Jesus Christ. They will become his bride upon our Lord’s second advent. Yet, Paul sees himself as the father of the bride. The Corinthians must carefully consider their standing in Christ when dealing with those who undermine that status.

In verse 3, Paul expresses his concern for his spiritual daughter—the church in Corinth—when he writes, *“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.”* As we read in our Old Testament lesson from Genesis 3, the account of the fall of the human race into sin involves the deception of Eve by the serpent, as well as the willful rebellion of Adam against the commandment of God not to eat from the tree. Eve was deceived. Adam was not. As covenant head, it was Adam’s responsibility to cast the serpent out of the garden before he could even approach Eve. But Adam failed in his responsibilities as covenant mediator and God’s vice-regent over the earth. He allowed the serpent into the garden and our fate was sealed.

In warning the Corinthians about the deceptive practices of the devil, Paul is being faithful to his office as both apostle to the Gentiles and as spiritual father of the Corinthian bride. Paul now warns the Corinthians about the imminent threat they face from the false teachers already among them. For just as Satan deceived Eve, so too the false teachers will find some way to lead the Corinthians away from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ. As Martin Luther so aptly put it, “the devil takes no holiday; he never rests. If beaten, he rises again. If he cannot enter in the front, he steals in at the rear. If he cannot enter in the rear, he breaks through the roof or enters by tunneling under the threshold. He labors until he is in. He uses great cunning and many a plan. When one miscarries, he has another at hand and continues his attempts until he wins.”³ This is precisely Paul’s point. There are false teachers present in Corinth because Satan is relentless. The Corinthians need to smell the sulphur and look for the cloven hoof print associated with false doctrine, all tell-tale signs of the devil’s presence among them.

In verse 4, Paul spells out in very precise terms what exactly these false teachers are up to in the Corinthian church. *“For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.”* The stark contrast here is inescapable. There is the Jesus Paul had proclaimed, and the Jesus being proclaimed by the false teachers. There is the Holy Spirit proclaimed by Paul, and the Holy Spirit of the false teachers. There is the gospel as preached by Paul, and there is a gospel preached by the false teachers. The false teachers proclaim a different Jesus. They proclaim a different Holy Spirit. They proclaim a different gospel. And what is worse, and certainly most troubling to Paul, the Corinthians put up with these men. The false teachers should have been stopped from teaching. They should be disciplined by the church, and if necessary, excommunicated. But no, the Corinthians put up with them because of their compelling rhetoric and ability to tickle ears.

Continuing the ironic tone, in verses 5-6, Paul writes, *“Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least*

³ Plass, What Luther Says, 1.1161.

inferior to these super-apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.” Again, playing on the low estimation that some in Corinth had of his abilities, Paul urges the Corinthians to consider the facts at hand. Paul may be inferior to the “super apostles” (which is clearly a derogatory term) in the minds of some, but not his own. Paul is not bragging about himself when he speaks like this, he is only pointing out the nature of his office and his calling. Paul has been called to preach a very particular gospel by none other than Jesus Christ himself. Therefore, whatever lack of skills Paul may have when evaluated from the perspective of the flesh, he has seen the risen Christ with his own eyes, and it is to Paul that our Lord revealed certain knowledge about the things of God. And Paul has proclaimed this knowledge to the Corinthians. They know the truth. They know the true Jesus. They heard all about him from Paul. They know the true Holy Spirit. He has worked in their midst. They know the true gospel. Paul has proclaimed it to them. There is no reason for tolerating these men in their midst.

Paul’s own track record bears this out. In verse 7, he asks, *“Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God’s gospel to you free of charge?”* Like every other preacher of the gospel who is worthy of his hire, Paul was entitled to be supported by the church so that he was free to devote himself full-time to his ministry. Instead, Paul took a day job and supported himself so that no one in the church could question his motives. But to the Greek mind, a speaker who had to work a day job to support himself was not a very good public speaker. And in the Greco-Roman world, manual laborers occupied a lower rung on the social scale than pretty much everyone except slaves. It was, no doubt, a humbling experience for Paul.

Again, using a bit of ironic rhetoric himself, Paul adds in verses 8-9, *“I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.”* Just as the Macedonians gave generously to the offering being taken in the Gentile churches for the poor and persecuted Christians in Jerusalem, so too they gave to support Paul’s missionary work to Corinth. The irony here is that the Macedonians were poor and the Corinthians were not. Yet, Paul made every effort not to be a burden to the Corinthians. In fact, as he says in verse 10, *“As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia.”* Achaia is the area around Corinth. Paul knows that the truth will prevail. The Corinthians know him, they have seen his personal sacrifices first-hand. And because of this, the Corinthians should know better than to be taken in by the false apostles when they attack Paul and his reputation.

Furthermore, the Corinthians know full well why Paul has endured all of this. As he asks them in verse 11, *“And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!”* Paul knows these people. They know him. He loves them not only because he is their spiritual father, but because he has been among them, and knows them by name. He knows their children by name. Paul knows where they live. He has had dinner in their homes. He knows where they work, what they do, and where they were born. Nothing has changed. *“And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do.”* Paul will soldier on, and in doing so, he will expose the false teachers, as well as their motives.

In verses 13-15, Paul calls these false apostles what they are—agents of Satan. *“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.”* These men claim to be apostles, but they demonstrate that they are not by the fact that they believe in a different Jesus than the one Paul proclaimed. They show they are false apostles because they teach a different Holy Spirit than Paul has

taught the Corinthians. They are false apostles because they preach a gospel different from that Paul preached in Corinth.

But if it is so obvious that these men are false apostles, why have the Corinthians been so gullible and allowed themselves to be taken in these men? The answer is that as Satan masquerades as an “angel of the light” so too these men masquerade as servants of righteousness. False apostles never arrive on the scene and announce, “hey, we are false apostles.” If you want make counterfeit \$20.00 bills, you don’t use purple ink with Santa Claus’s face. Furthermore, not everything these false teachers teach is false. No doubt, these men had an interesting take on certain things, and were able to communicate in a way in which the Corinthians found compelling. It is also highly likely that these false apostles were nice men with pleasant personalities. The Corinthians would not have put up with them if things were otherwise. And for Paul, it is no surprise, because this is Satan’s standard mode of operation.

What then do we take with us in terms of application?

First, we must understand how to spot a false apostle. The test is content. False apostles deny the Jesus, Holy Spirit, and the gospel revealed in Scripture. The issue is not a person’s sincerity—false apostles may really believe that what they are doing and teaching is right. The issue is not ability. False apostles are often very capable communicators and clever thinkers, or else no one would listen to them. The issue is not relevance. No doubt, the false apostles in Corinth seemed far more “relevant” than Paul did, because they were able to offer people a Christianized version of the paganism in which they had been raised. False apostles likely have useful insights into daily life, as well as easy solutions to the life’s problems. The issue is not whether they draw followers, whether they are successful, or whether they are likeable. They are usually all of these things.

The point is that the church’s primary business is not to address life’s problems, to be popular with non-Christians, or to be successful as the world regards success. Jesus Christ, who is the bridegroom of his church, has assigned to us the task of addressing the root cause of all of life’s problems—our sin, our guilt before God, and our need of a Savior. And this is how we spot a false apostle. Content. What do they teach and preach? False apostles always preach and teach something other than the gospel revealed in God’s word. The test is not their sincerity, ability, practicality, success, or likeability. The test is the content of what their doctrine. Which Jesus do they teach? What gospel do they proclaim?

And this leads to a second point of application. To spot a false apostle, you need to know the true Jesus, the true Holy Spirit, and the true gospel. In order succeed in his deception, Satan requires an apathetic, and doctrinally ignorant church, so that when the false Jesus, false Holy Spirit, and false gospel show up, nobody blinks. Satan succeeds when people don’t know the difference, or else they don’t care. This is why we need to know our Bibles. This is why we need to know our catechism. And this is why we need to devote ourselves to learning the truth, so that we are not deceived. If we not learning the truth, inevitably we will pick up error from the pagan culture which surrounds us. We are all being catechized. The question is by whom? Which Jesus and what gospel are we learning?

Beloved, Paul has duly warned us. It is no surprise. It is not a matter of if, but when.