

A Fully Integrated Character

II Corinthians 1:12-14

Rick Peterson

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus (II Corinthians 1:12-14).

Paul has a boast to make, but it is a boast in the grace of God, and not himself. His opponents in Corinth, the false apostles, also have a boast, but it is in their worldly wisdom, their boast is in themselves. And this is a critical lesson for us in this study. Since the beginning, evil workers have sought to redefine the gospel into a program which affords human boasting. The influence of Greek philosophy and Judaism upon the gospel of grace, was hard to resist in the first century, and it remains hard for us to resist today. By the second century, many of the so-called church fathers had modified the gospel into a grace assisted program of self-justification.¹ By this, I mean a gospel that concedes the necessity of divine assistance, but places man himself and his actions as the ultimate cause of his own salvation. In this scheme, for instance, one may confess the *necessity* of grace, but deny the *sufficiency* of grace, apart from one's own contribution. In II Corinthians, Paul's opponents operate as ministers of the letter of the law as the necessary means by which one gains righteousness before God, though they professed to servants of Christ. Their boast, in the final analysis, is of their own effort. The outcome for this type of ministry was then, and remains today, hypocrisy; a double-standard between what is professed and what is actually lived.

¹ See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock, 1996).

Conduct that Supports our Profession

But Paul is telling his readers his boast is in the fact that he and his associates have conducted themselves, both in the world and within the church, with integrity and godly sincerity. Paul is the same person in the world that he is in the church, and vice versa. Some Bibles will read, “With holiness and godly sincerity,” as opposed to “integrity and godly sincerity.” But to be holy is to walk in integrity, that is, to be an integrated person. There is no holiness apart from possessing integrity. What you profess and how you live must be in harmony. To have integrity (holiness) is to be who you say you are; and to have godly sincerity, is to be authentically like God. You may recall that the historic meaning of the word *sincere* means to be “without wax.” There was a time when merchants would fill cracked or otherwise flawed pottery with wax and seal it over with paint. But in the heat, the wax would melt and expose the cracks and defects. So while Paul later confesses himself to be a jar of clay within which God has placed the treasure of the gospel, he is without wax. He is the real thing.

So, Paul is saying his conduct in the world and in the church supports his profession in word. That’s his boast. He is what he says he is, especially within the church, and even when the heat is on. But this is so *because he relies upon the grace of God*, and not worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom, philosophy, sociology, psychology, political science, does not change the heart, and it is the human heart, declares Scripture, that is the root of the problem (Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:20-22). It is the grace of God alone that makes Paul a fully integrated follower of Jesus Christ, not some program of worldly wisdom. Paul states in his first letter to the Corinthians,

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (I Corinthians 15:9-10).

Sometimes it is easy to think of the grace of God as passive, or that grace means God looks the other way when we sin, but here we discover that Paul says it was the grace of God that caused him to worked harder than all the other apostles, though he considered himself the least among them. Grace actually compels us to work hard and not be passive in the ministry, and to understand that boasting belongs therefore to God and not people. If our ministry is effective, it is because of the grace of God, and not worldly wisdom. Paul was a fully integrated

believer, the message of the cross was not only professed by his words, but by his lifestyle. Now, let's look closer at this worldly wisdom. Turn with me to James, chapter three, verses, 13-18.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

James is telling us, as did Paul, that the profession of wisdom and understanding must be backed up by our lifestyle and deeds. This is the fully integrated believer. Now, the alternative is the one who pretends to be wise and understanding, and yet harbors bitter envy and selfish ambition in their heart. This type of wisdom stands in contrast to the grace of God, and James says it does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. This is serious language, "earthly, unspiritual, demonic." James is saying there are professed believers who operate out an earthly, unspiritual, demonic influence, as evidenced by envy and selfish ambition. Take note. All such wisdom can produce, says James, is disorder and every evil practice. Oh, that the Christian faith was judged by genuine, Spirit produced Christlike character and not doctrinal statements, baptismal certificates, and so on!

Now, James would add that Paul was operating out of wisdom that comes from heaven, which is first of all pure (fully integrated, genuine); then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, here comes that word again, "sincere." Later, in our study of II Corinthians, Paul also identifies certain ministers who are in fact servants of Satan who appears as an angel of light. How different than the conduct of Paul and his associates at Corinth who act in integrity and godly sincerity both in the world and in the church!

So Paul has a boast, but not in himself nor in worldly wisdom, but in his reliance upon the grace of God by which the message of the cross has become fully integrated into his character and thus his conduct both in the world and in the church. Paul is a jar of clay that is

without wax. And his conduct is not motivated to gain final acceptance before God, but because in Christ, he is already accepted in the Beloved. And so, Paul's modeling here is a cause for pause for us all. Most professing Christians profess to believe the gospel of Christ and him crucified. They may not yet fully understand the implications of that belief, but they do believe in the message of the cross. And this defines therefore the work before us all, to grow from partly integrated believers to fully integrated believers.

The Means to a Fully Integrated Faith

We all come to faith in Christ by means of the gospel, and we all begin the Christian life with only a partial understanding of that gospel. There is no shame in possessing only a partial understanding, unless of course, we fail to grow in the grace of God into a full understanding. And the grace of God comes to us by means, and the Scripture is that means; in the case of our text, the writings of the apostles is the means by which we may grow from a partial understanding to a fully understanding of the message of the cross, and thereby become a fully integrated believer. Paul tells us he does not write his readers anything they cannot read or understand. The Scriptures, as the means of grace, are meant to be understood and applied by all. Listen, please, Christianity is not a mystery religion in which the truth is reserved only for an elite group of ascended leaders, though sometimes pastors and clergy behave as such. Paul assures his readers they can understand what he says, though he does hope they will grow in their understanding. So while there is *not* an ascended elite, there are differing levels of understanding and spiritual maturity within the church family. The apostle John says it this way,

I am writing to you, dear children,
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

¹³ I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

¹⁴ I write to you, dear children,
because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,

and the word of God lives in you,
and you have overcome the evil one (I John 2:12-14).

And Peter adds,

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

¹⁰Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (II Peter 1:3-11).

The life of the believer is to be a testimony to the grace of both in word and in conduct; our daily lives are to be fully integrated with the spoken message of the cross. And this is accomplished by means of the apostolic writings, that is to say, our prayerful study of the New Testament, better understood to be the New Covenant. To be a fully integrated believer you must rely upon the grace of God alone, by the means of grace, the Scriptures alone, as applied to you by the work of the Spirit, alone. This is what it means to be under a new covenant of the Spirit (see II Corinthians 3:1-4:6). Of course, you can join Paul's opponents and become a minister of the letter of the Law as the means, and avoid relying upon the grace of God by the Spirit. But your end will be according to your deeds, as was Paul's opponents (II Corinthians 11:15).

A Mutual Boast

Finally, Paul wants his readers to fully understand what he has written so that he and his readers can share a mutual admiration, affection, and even boast as fellow participants in the

grace of God. As already stated, the Christian faith is not a mystery religion within we work toward an ascended status; rather, there is no hierarchy, at least no *legitimate* hierarchy. Jesus himself made this clear to his disciples telling them they were not to assume titles and status over each other, for he alone is the Teacher, Father, and Instructor of the church, and whatever of these gifts are worked out among us, come from him (Matthew 23:5-12; Ephesians 4:1-16). There is one Lord, and no one leader or group of leaders, has any legitimate claim to rule over a brother and/or sister. Such power grabs have everything to do with the worldly wisdom defined above, and nothing to do with the integrity and godly sincerity in conduct modeled by Paul and his associates.

But such a hierarchy has been and remains the default of any church that fails to integrate the message of the cross into its character. This is what is at risk. One brief example: The apostle John writes of a man named “Diotrephes” who loved to be first, or “preeminent” and thus usurp the place of Christ in the church. This man would not welcome even the apostle John in the church! (III John. V.9-10). What a contrast to Paul, who later tells the Corinthians, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm” (II Corinthians 1:24). This is the difference between a genuine minister of the new covenant of the Spirit, in Paul and his associates, and every other counterfeit ministry and system that distorts or altogether dismisses the ministry of the new covenant, and there are many, but we will speak more on that in a future lesson, Lord willing. **AMEN.**

© Rick Peterson, 2023.