

Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Introduction

Sometimes it is appropriate simply to endure criticism and not respond (**1 Pet. 2:23**). At other times, however, it is necessary to answer critics. Such was the situation for Paul in 2 Corinthians.

Summary

In 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, being left with no alternative, Paul gives a reluctant summary of his ministry, boasting of his weaknesses which is intended to shame his critics into silence.

1. Compelled Boasting vv 16-21

Paul begins with the plea: 'Let no one think me foolish' (**11:16**). Nevertheless, even if people were to think of him like that, Paul should at least be allowed to 'boast a little'. Speaking 'foolishly' goes hand in hand with "this boastful confidence" (**11:17**).

Given that others boasted about their achievements, albeit 'according to the flesh', the apostle felt that the time had come to engage in some boasting of his own, although his boasting would take a different form and be done for different reasons (**11:18**).

What follows then is a reluctant summary of his ministry which is intended to shame his critics into silence.

Paul's list of achievements is the exact opposite of the approach taken by his rivals. The believers in Corinth could not complain about Paul's 'boasting'.

The church in Corinth had such misplaced pride in its own maturity, and such unjustified confidence in its capacity for discernment, that it had allowed itself to be exploited and enslaved by a group of unscrupulous charlatans (**2 Cor 11:20**).

They liked to characterize Paul as 'weak' (**2 Cor 11:21**). He and his associates were certainly much too weak to enslave a church by deceit and then oppress it.

2. Boasted Weakness vv. 22-30

As far as his heritage was concerned, Paul was the equal of his critics. and in every other area, he surpassed them (**2 Cor 11:22**).

It used to be considered inappropriate to parade your own achievements but now it is acceptable and even expected that you sell yourself. In this respect, our society resembles that of Paul's day. The apostle's readers were expecting a list of triumphs. What they got was something akin to a list of disasters (**2 Cor 11:30**).

Paul's opponents threw down the gauntlet to Paul to compare his credentials with theirs.

Having restrained himself for some time, the apostle now judges it is time to respond.

The first qualifications he chose to list were hard work, beatings, imprisonments and experiences where he had looked death in the face (**2 Cor 11:23**). These themes are elaborated in **2 Cor 11:24-25**. Paul then goes on to describe how his life as a preacher had exposed him to constant danger (**2 Cor 11:26**).

The ‘weariness and toil were unrelenting and he often had to go without, hence his reference to ‘hunger and thirst’ often without food, in cold and exposure’ (**11:27**). Paul answers his opponents: ‘What have I done for the gospel? I have lived on a knife-edge and put my life on the line again and again.’

As if all this were not enough, in addition to all these problems raging on the outside, Paul was often in turmoil inside (**2 Cor 11:28-29**). His questions, “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?”, reveal something of Paul's inner life. We can sum up Paul's defense of himself as follows: ‘Do you want to know what my record is? I do not have much excitement to report, but I have been anxious every day, troubled in my soul lest you folk in Corinth come unstuck. “Who will achieve more for God in the long run the man with star quality, a big name and a high profile, or the man who cares enough to go through the mill?”’

3. Intriguing Postscript vv. 31-33

Why did Paul include the time when he was trapped in Damascus but nevertheless escaped in this section of his epistle?

First, this was a sign to Paul of what life was going to be like from then on.

A man who had dazzling prospects must yield to a future of living hand to mouth, moment by moment, with danger never far away. Secondly, it is a sign to Paul's readers, then and now. Do we want to live lives that will count for God? We must not assume that this will go hand in hand with applause, recognition and the limelight.

4. Uncomfortable Concluding Questions

Are we, like the Corinthians, much too ready to be taken in by those who resemble Paul's rivals? Churches would do well to be wary of preeminence and to remember what Jesus had to say about ambition (**Matt. 20:25-26**).

How far are we like Paul in glorying in weaknesses?

Our experience is very unlike that of the apostle Paul.

Nevertheless, we could at least be more realistic in our assessment of ourselves. Suppose we had faced the same challenges that Paul faced, how far would our patient endurance have matched his?

A becoming modesty about our own levels of commitment, consecration and achievement for the gospel would not come amiss.