

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

“A Selfless Servant”

Paul the apostle was a very interesting man (to say the least) on multiple levels. God used his life in so many incredible ways we often find ourselves (and rightfully so) admiring him, we have a respect for him, we think, “Man it would be great if I could just be like him.” Imitating him (as he said) as he imitated Christ. **But I have discovered (perhaps you have to) that God has this way of bringing balance into our lives. and We’ve spoken of this before, it seems that there’s a general rule in God’s school of ministry and that is that to the degree He takes you up, He 1st takes you to that same degree...down.** The proverbs say it like this, “*Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, And before honor is humility.*” Prov 18:12 The higher you climb, the lower you have to go, and if for some reason exaltation comes before humiliation in your case, a lesson in humility will be quick on it’s heels, believe me. It’s *humility* that equals *use-ability*; pride will get you set aside. **Because God wants to uses you, but it needs to be clear in your heart, in my heart that it’s God who’s using me, that what’s going on is to His glory, and it’s no credit to some cunning skill or marketing technique, or personal attribute of my own. God used Paul the apostle in a manner that I would say was 2nd to none apart from Christ upon the face of this earth, yet the cost that Paul had to count to be in that place was tremendous.**

We often find ourselves wanting to be like Paul until we realize what exactly it was like to *be like* Paul and then we want to sorta recoil from that request. Even from the inception of his conversion. Remember? There he was Saul of Tarsus, the young rising superstar of the Jewish sect of Pharisees, sitting at the feet of Gamaliel; the most well respected Rabbi in all of Israel, excelling in zeal beyond all of his contemporaries, persecuting the church beyond measure. **After all the they were promoting a righteousness outside of the law, by simply believing in a crucified carpenter whom they claimed was the Son of God that had risen from the dead. As far as he was concerned it was blasphemy so he was doing his best to extinguish the church as a movement before it spread too far. Having them dragged off, consenting to their death, seeking to do them in.** You know the story there he was one day on his way to Damascus when he had an up close and personal encounter with Jesus. Light shown around him, he was knocked off his horse and Jesus said, “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?” He said, “Who are You Lord?” He said, “I’m Jesus whom you are persecuting it’s hard for you to kick against the goads.” **and We read that he, “trembling and astonished” said, “Lord, what do you want me to do?”** Awesome question by the way, Jesus intervened in your life, rescued you from the pit of hell for a reason, have you ever bothered to ask Him why? Have you said to Him, “Lord, what do you want *me* to do?” For 3 days Saul was blind, waiting on Ananias to come and minister to him, and share the love of God with him. But you remember what Jesus told Ananias about Paul? He said, “*Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.*” Acts 9:15 We read that and we go, “Right on! What a purpose! What a plan! What a path that God had for Paul to travel down, to bear His name before Gentiles, *kings*, and the children of Israel. He was going to take him high.” But don’t miss the next Vs, “*For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.*” Acts 9:16 We read that and we go, “What a purpose...what a plan...what a path that God had for Paul to travel down, He was going to take him *low*.”

and In the text that's before us we get just a bit of a glimpse of what it cost Paul to be used of the Lord in such an incredible way, what were his apostolic credentials? Notice.

Vs16

You recall the context; Paul was being backed into a corner having to defend his authenticity to the Corinthian believers, not for his sake but for theirs. That they might receive from him because they were being deceived by these "false apostles" in their midst; they were "buying the lie" and rejecting the truth. But Paul loved them too much to sit by idly and watch them drink in the poison that was being administered to them to their own destruction. and He hated talking about himself, would much rather talk about Christ, he felt like talking about himself was foolishness, what's the point? But if it would somehow and in some way serve as a wake up call to the Corinthians than so be it. and So he says, "Let no one think me a fool." "Hey, they're trying to tell you I'm on some imaginary commission in my mind from Christ like I'm an idiot, I'm not that stupid, don't take me as a fool. But even if that's how you perceive me, than at least receive me that way for a minute here." He's saying, "Contrary to popular opinion I'm no idiot, but if that's the way you perceive me do me a favor, don't *tune me out* just yet, *hear me out*, I've got some things I want to share with you."

and As I said Paul hated talking about himself, but I'm kinda glad he was put in this position because if not we'd have no idea what it cost Paul to serve the Lord. We'd all feel like we had it rough or something. and I have a feeling that what Paul shares isn't all of it at that, he only spoke about it as long as was necessary in order to get their attention and then turned back off of himself. "But if they're questioning substance of my calling, the credentials of my calling, here they are."

Vs17

Now don't misunderstand him here. He's not saying that the words he's writing aren't inspired by the Holy Spirit as scripture in order to bring about correction or give direction in the life of the reader. Because the point here is to recognize the promotion of self as folly, our credentials as servants of God aren't found in our own accomplishments but rather in that which Christ has accomplished for us. These guys that are discrediting Paul are doing so on the basis of who they are, what they've done, their P. H. D.'s and doctorates in theology. and Paul is seeking to point out to them the reality that when it comes to being a servant of Christ it's not about who we are, it's about who *He* is. It's not about what we've accomplished; it's about what *He's* accomplished. The fact is that in Christ we're not to enter the equation at all, we're dead to self, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Remember this Vs? "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*" Gal 2:20 So when he says, "I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were foolishly, in this confidence of boasting." What he's saying is that even though he finds it necessary it's not something that typifies the life of Christ. Jesus didn't take this approach, because as he states bragging or boasting of self is foolish. The Lord said to Jeremiah, "*Thus says the Lord: 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,' says the Lord.*" Jer 9:23-24

But this is where the Corinthians are at, looking for the shining star, but what Paul is going to portray to them is the suffering servant. Like Christ Paul was a man stricken often times with grief, acquainted with sorrow and affliction. **Serving the Lord isn't to be a matter of "shining," but being willing to enter the fellowship of His suffering, it's not about being a star, it's about being a servant. But if the Corinthians are looking to things in which one might boast of outwardly, the things they've been apart of physically, Paul will give them a little of that if that's what they want.**

Vs18-21

Paul is saying, "We come to you in Jesus name, we were good to you, humble before you, just looking to be a blessing and somehow that's a strike against us. But these guys come to you and place legal trips on you, rip you off, promote themselves and punish you and you somehow think that's real spiritual." **It's almost like the case of an abused woman who refuses to get out of that situation. I'm not sure what it is in some women but they can't seem to function unless they're some guy's punching bag. They just won't get themselves out of that environment, and it's like Paul is saying, "We brought you to Christ who is a good Husband, treats you right, wants to bless you with freedom and liberty, grace and mercy but you're skipping out on Him to be with these abusers."**

Now the Greeks prided themselves on wisdom, and that's the biting sarcasm of Vs 19, "You guys claim to be wise, but you're putting up with these fools like it somehow makes you more spiritual to undergo their trip, their bondage. Where's the wisdom in that?"

and These were the Judaizers who would come in and say, "Well serving Christ is great, but you also need to be circumcised, keep the law of Moses..." **But if righteousness comes by the law then Christ died in vain, so Christ would set these people free, then these guys would come in and place a yoke of legalistic bondage on them. "Oh you've come to Christ, that's great, but if you're not baptized you're not saved." What!? Either Jesus saves or He doesn't, it's either righteousness by grace through faith, or it's about me doing something for myself, you can't have it both ways.** You need to dress this way, wear your hair that way; is it about what I *do* or what Jesus has *done*? The Holy Spirit is well able to speak to that person about what their life in Christ is to be, man looks to the outward appearance, God searches the heart.

Not only were they placing legal bondage on them, they were devouring them, or draining them of their money, it's a word that speaks of a parasite that depends on its host, draining them of their livelihood so that they can live off of them. **Remember when Jesus spoke of the Pharisees as those who would "devour" widow's houses and for pretense (or for the sake of their image) make long prayers. It's the same word "devour" just ripping them off, taking from them.**

Exalting themselves, speaking of their great accomplishments in order to keep others beneath them, and striking them on the face. It wasn't uncommon in that day to be literally struck across the face for disciplinary purposes in a religious setting. (You think church discipline is bad today). **But remember when Jesus was on trial and the high priest asked Him about His doctrine and Jesus said, "I've taught openly everywhere I've gone, you can ask anyone who's heard Me and they'll tell you, I've not hidden anything." and Then the officer standing by struck Jesus across the face with the palm of his hand and said, "Do you answer the high priest like that?"**

When Paul was on trial there in Acts 23 he said, “I’ve lived in all good conscience to this day before both God and man.” and The high priest commanded him to be struck across the face. Well that’s the type of thing that was going on here, “You guys sit by and think it’s acceptable to be disciplined by being physically beaten, you take that kind of treatment.” But that’s why when he’s listing the qualifications of an overseer there in 1st Tim one of the qualifications listed is that he isn’t to be a striker. It’s not Christ like to haul off and waylay someone because they’re out of line on a point of doctrine or have acted with some disrespect. That’s what was going on here and Paul says, “Well you got me there, I was too weak for that, we didn’t resort to smacking you across the face when you were out of line.”

But in these ways they were commending themselves, their pedigree that they would claim qualified them to be over them, Paul says, “They don’t have anything on me.”

Vs22

In Acts Ch 6 you find that there were 2 classes of Jews, those who spoke Greek (as a 1st language) and those who were raised to speak Aramaic, and for whatever reason there was a stereotype that considered the Aramaic speaking Jews as a little better class kind of a person. and So when he mentions being a Hebrew that’s what he’s referencing, he could speak Greek, but he was raised to speak Aramaic as his 1st language. “Israelites” as in he was of Jacob, not Esau part of the 12 tribes (specifically of Benjamin). and He was of the seed of Abraham meaning he was apart of the covenant promise regarding the Messiah that God had given him. (Now again we know that these physical attributes mean nothing, Ab believed God and became the father of faith, and when we believe God we’re accredited with the same righteousness of Christ and become heirs of the promise under Abraham as well. We don’t have time to exhaust that you might jot down Rom 4, there’s a bit in Ch 9 as well). But he’s simply saying that if that was what truly qualified a minister of Christ, he’s got all that covered as well.

Vs23

You want apostolic accreditation there it is, abundant labor, stripes above measure, in prison all the time, confronted with the reality of your own impending death on a regular basis. “Where do I sign? Not!” Paul was hardcore.

Now I would like to draw one thing out of this Vs before we move on because not all of these things are going to apply to us (to which we say praise the Lord) but he speaks here of abundant labor. Listen, as believers in Jesus Christ we need to be those who will work hard for His glory. Not only as it pertains to the ministry, but as it pertains to whatever it is that we’re doing practically, be it at work or whatever. Remember Paul said, “*And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.*” Col 3:23-24 We’re to do what we do heartily as to the Lord, not as to men, because in whatever it is that we’re doing we’re serving the Lord Christ. and We don’t want to give Jesus a bad rap because we’re not willing to work, so be a good worker, labor abundantly for Jesus Christ and God will honor that.

Now as we read through these things that Paul is “boasting” about put yourself in his place. If you were given a window of opportunity to boast about some things in your life what would you choose? He could’ve written of miracles wrought through his life, the revival in Ephesus, revelations and the illumination of the heart of God and the Word of God that was given to him, visions, seeing multitudes turn to Christ through his ministry; check it out.

Vs24-28

I read through these things and wonder if I really even know what it means to serve Jesus, or to be committed to Christ, my worst days are like a walk in the park compared to what this man went through. and Again this is just a little window by which he's allowing us to peer into his life, it's not the full story I have no doubt.

“From the Jews 5 times I received 40 stripes minus 1.” The law allowed for a maximum of 40 stripes upon a man who deserved to be beaten, and what they would do it tie the man to a pole tear down his clothes so that his torso was exposed and the one administering the stripes would stand on a stone, or a pedestal of some sort to gain some leverage and he would get 3 sets of 13 stripes with all the might of the one who was whipping him. 13 to the right shoulder, 13 to the left, and 13 across the back, or the chest.

and The reason for 39 wasn't because of a desire to show mercy (in this case) it was for fear of a miscount. Because God's word only allowed for 40, so 3 sets of 13 and they felt they were safe with that. But a man could die under any of these penalties, Paul got them multiple times simply because he served Christ. 195 Stripes, 3 times he was beaten with rods, or what we would call caning today (that was a Roman form of punishment/penalty), shipwrecked 3 times. and These things show us again how that the book of Acts is fragmentary at best, it's not a complete detailed record of events. We don't read of all of Paul's floggings, or canings, we only read of 1 shipwreck it was after these that he records for us here so he was shipwrecked at least 4 times. A night and day bobbing around in the open sea, can you imagine how horrifying it would be to be hanging on to some piece of wood out floating over night in the open sea not knowing if you'll see land, get eaten by sharks (I'm sure Jonah crossed his mind).

He was stoned once (and not in the ancient hippie sense of the word) but pummeled with large stones until he was dragged outside the city and left for dead. That's how people will repay you for your service, 1 minute they were heralding him as a god, the next minute they murdered him and left him for dead outside the city, consider that your honorarium!

His life was constantly threatened and in danger, that's what he's in reference to there in Vs 26 “perils” speaking of dangerous situations, his life being on the line kind of a circumstance. Travel was incredibly dangerous in his time, forging overflowing rivers, there were robbers along the travel routes, Mt passes and river banks just waiting to rob you, leave you for dead and take your things. (Remember Jesus spoke of such a situation in the parable of the good Samaritan). His life was in danger because of the Jews, because of the Gentiles, danger was upon him in the city, in the wilderness, in sea, among those whom he thought were brothers in Christ who turned out to be *against* him and sought to do damage *to* him. He speaks of weariness and toil, sleeplessness often. Again most likely due to the danger of falling asleep under the open sky, someone would come along slit your throat and take your stuff, you just weren't safe. You couldn't hit a drive through on your way to Troas coming from Ephesus, you often just went with out, you went hungry, thirsty, in cold and nakedness (in sufficient clothing for the environment you were in) but you didn't have a credit card to take to Wal-mart. It was just incredibly tough times for the missionary minded man.

Now you get to Vs 28 and your mind just reels with curiosity, “Besides the other things,” besides the other things? What other things! He figures that’s enough to suffice, but there’s one thing that in his heart outweighs them all. Those things come and go, the thing that burdens him, presses in on him and gives no rest to him day after day after day is his constant, and deep concern for all the churches that he’s planted and proceeded on from. Alan Redpath said this regarding Paul’s constant concern for all the churches. “I could not possibly convey to you adequately in the English language the force of that statement. I tried to picture it in terms of being smothered under a blanket, or by being attacked and crushed by some great animal, for he could not have used a stronger word when he said, in effect, ‘That which bears me down, that which is upon me as an intolerable load, that which is a burden, that which is something that I can never shake off day or night. It is with me always. I have no vacation for it ever. It is upon me daily. The care, the compassion, the concern of all the churches.’” Those other things had to do with him, he could deal with that, but when it came to the people of God, his brothers and sisters in Christ, his care, his compassion, his concern for their spiritual health and well-being outweighed the burden of all those other things. Paul was such an “others oriented” kind of man it was unbelievable. He teaches us that true ministry goes way beyond sharing the word, it’s a matter of sharing ourselves.

When looking for a spiritual leader, don’t look to the stars, look for the scars. It amazes me that he finds his boast *not* in the praise of men, or those things that could make him a shining star, but rather in that he’s a suffering servant. He makes his boast in those things that cast him down to the ground absolutely helpless. Those things that made for his weakness, because as we’ll see next time it’s in our weakness that Christ’s strength is made perfect. He so desperately wanted Christ to be glorified in his life that he gloried in his weaknesses because it’s there that Christ was most clearly seen, him being out of the way.

Vs29

This is his deep concern, when there’s a weak brother, it’s like he feels for the guy in his bones, when someone stumbles it gets to him way down in his gut, it just tears him up.

Vs30-33

This sorta takes us full circle, he headed for Damascus a proud Pharisee with his head held high. He left with his dignity being torn from him humiliated being reduced to hiding in a basket being let out through a window down the wall because he was already a marked man. It was like his “apprenticeship in persecution.” It’s how his ministry began (suffering for Jesus sake) and it was how it was continuing. It was a foretaste of his future as an apostle of Jesus Christ

How can we read a portion of scripture such as this and then find it in our heart to somehow boast of all we’ve done for Jesus Christ? But how we ought to be on our faces before God just crying out that we might be selfless servants, true in our commitment to love Him and serve Him with all that we are. Him increasing, us decreasing, that others might see Him, come to know Him and grow in Him. That we might know what it means to be truly sold out to Jesus that Christ would be magnified in our bodies whether by life, or by death.

Prayer Points:

God that's our prayer, that from the deepest recess of who we are we might be sold out to You, that You might be magnified and glorified in us. Teach us the nature of true humility, boasting (if must be) in our infirmities, the things that make for our weakness that Your strength might be magnified. Lord none of us look forward to the crucible, going through the refiner's fire, nevertheless we realize that You are a tender loving God whom we can trust fully. and So we want to relinquish ourselves into Your care and surrender our heart into Your hands and simply say, "Have Your way in us." Taking us and transforming us into the image of Jesus, may we be soft and pliable like clay in Your hands.

Life in Christ isn't always a primrose path, it can be difficult, turbulent and at times trying. But there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. Jesus never promised an easy life, He said "Count the cost" He offered forgiveness of sin, His personal righteousness accredited to you and everlasting life. Paul went through incredible trials, unlike most of us will ever experience, yet he said, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment (in the eternal spectrum of things) is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Don't be distracted by the cares, the pleasures, and the things of this world, grab hold of the eternal perspective and give your heart to Christ. Just trust in Him, His work on your behalf, and receive salvation today.