

2 Corinthians 12:11-21
(Ezekiel 36:25-27; John 14:12-17)
“All for Your Upbuilding, Beloved”

Introduction

Paul has boasted in those things that show his weakness so that it might be clear that the transformative power at work in his life and ministry was not from him, but from the Lord and, therefore, that all praise and honor and glory belonged not to Paul, but to the Lord. This in contrast to his opponents who boasted in themselves and in their spiritual gifts and experiences.

Nevertheless, Paul now makes it clear that the marks of a true apostle were so clearly displayed in his life and ministry that the church in Corinth never should have been deceived by false teachers, but should in fact have been Paul's strongest defenders. In concluding this final rebuttal of his opponents, Paul reminds us of those things that marked him as a true apostle of Christ, and in the process reminds us of what should increasingly mark our lives, if we are disciples of Jesus and being transformed by grace ever-increasingly into the image of Christ.

Body

1. The signs of a true apostle (12:11-13, esp. v.12).

“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works” (12:12).

What were these “signs of an apostle”? Many believe that Paul lists them here: “signs and wonders and mighty works.” However, Paul says, “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with signs” etc., the force of which is, I think, “*along* with signs and wonders,” etc. In other words, Paul says that the things that marked one as a true apostle were done by him, and in addition, the power of God was displayed in signs and wonders and mighty works.

What then would be the signs to which he refers? Paul always made the case for his apostleship by pointing to the lives transformed and the churches planted by the power of God through his ministry. Apostles took up the ministry of Jesus, teaching the Scriptures, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing broken lives. That was the essence of Jesus' ministry and he passed it on to the apostles: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). The false apostles could boast all they liked of the miracles done through them, of their eloquence and power, but their

ministries had not been owned of God in transformed lives and transformed communities.

Do we realize that this same ministry has been entrusted to *us* by the apostles? As the Father sent the Son, and as the Son sent his apostles, even so the apostles passed on to the church, to you and to me, the mission of making disciples by proclaiming the good news of Christ, teaching the Scriptures and taking the love and healing power of Christ to a broken world, all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, the wrong question for a Christian to ask is, “Are my needs being met?” or, “Am I as happy as I might be?” or “Am I getting the credit I think I deserve?” or all the other self-centered, self-referential questions we tend naturally to ask. The sign, not only of an apostle, but of any follower of Jesus, should be that those around us see us daily pursuing a gospel-centered, Spirit-empowered life, as we point them away from ourselves and toward the One whose glory we seek.

2. The heart of a true apostle (12:14-18, esp. v.15).

“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls” (12:15).

The heart of a true apostle is motivated by self-sacrificial love. Paul’s opponents mocked him for making the Gospel free of charge, implying that in doing so he devalued the gospel. By his not making demands on the Corinthian Christians, Paul’s opponents said that he demonstrated his weakness.

But Paul saw the Corinthians as his spiritual children, and as a parent seeks to provide for his children rather than having his children provide for him, so too Paul sought to make his life and ministry a gift to the church in Corinth. Why?

Because Jesus, who is our only Lord and Master, came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). He warned us not to be like “the rulers of the Gentiles [who] lord it over them,” (Matthew 20:25) but rather to imitate him in pouring ourselves out in self-sacrificial love.

This is why motive does matter. The Lord wants to change our affections, so that worship and service become a joy to us. For a Christian in a difficult place, whether in marriage or parenting or work or health, the situation is an opportunity to express the love of Christ. To immediately become focused on oneself and one’s desires is a denial of the gospel of love. It is a daily battle for us all, yet in Christ we are already more than conquerors.

3. The goal of a true apostle (12:19-21, esp. v.19).

“It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved” (12:19).

Clearly, Paul’s great, overarching goal was God’s glory. But he knew that God is glorified through our joyful obedience, particularly in what Jesus called “bearing much fruit,” as in, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8).

We bear fruit in two ways: first by becoming increasingly like Jesus, so that what Paul called “the fruit of the Spirit,” that is, the character of Christ, increasingly marks our lives; and secondly, we bear fruit by calling others to join us on the journey as we follow Jesus, fulfilling the call to make disciples. This was what Jesus did. “Follow me,” were the words he used over and over again as he invited people to join him in a disciple-making relationship (e.g., Matthew 4:19). And Paul told Christians to follow him as he followed Christ: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1Corinthians 11:1).

We find ourselves keeping the law of God, to love God and love our neighbor, as we live for God’s glory and for our neighbor’s good. So, Paul wrote, “It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved” (12:19). His great motive toward his neighbor, and especially toward his Christian brothers and sisters, was to build them up in their life in Christ, and to live as “in the sight of God.”

Imagine how our families, friendships, and communities would be transformed if we lived, planned, thought and acted as people moved by a great and consuming desire to build up our families, our friends and neighbors, even in situations where it might mean self-sacrifice on our part, always aware that we live our lives in the sight of God.

Conclusion

In describing the marks of a true apostle, Paul is simply describing what should increasingly mark all of us who have heard the Master say, “Come, follow me.” We know, and the Lord knows, that we will never get it perfectly right, that we will at times lapse into selfishness, ambition, pride and fear, that our only claim to his grace is the righteousness of Christ, who credits his righteousness to those who trust and receive him.

But he calls us to a new life direction, a new trajectory, to lives increasingly marked by his Spirit within us, as we seek to build one another up in love, always aware that we live and move and have our being in the sight of our great God and King, who in grace beyond measure invites us to call him our Father.

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