

CARING FOR CORINTHIANS

2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-21

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning! Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps?

Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification. For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned

before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.

In 2 Corinthians 10-13 Paul speaks a lot about boasting. The false teachers in Corinth had been boasting of their spiritual authority and prowess - even to the point of labeling themselves, “super apostles.”

In response, Paul too felt the need to boast.

In these chapters he does what he doesn't like to do - *talk about himself*. Yet because of the libel and slander hurled at him by his critics in Corinth, Paul felt the need to defend his faith and his ministry - and so he boasted.

I wonder how this boasting for the Corinthians - both Paul's boasting, and the boasting of the false teachers, would've played out in modern times. For today, we have invented the ultimate form of boasting... *the selfie*.

Even it's name smacks of boasting... it's all about self.

It starts by *tilting your smartphone to a 45 degree angle, shifting to take advantage of the appropriate light, angling your body toward the camera, putting on an appropriate facial expression, then snap - afterwards you apply a flattering filter, then with a click you can post your selfie to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where hopefully you'll receive likes, hearts, and thumbs up*.

Instantly you alerted the world of your presence.

Why don't we snap a congregational selfie right now...

Apparently, the selfie has been around quite a while, but it really went viral in 2004, when the iPhone 4 introduced the

front-facing camera. Today, 91% of US teenagers post photos of themselves online. There are 90 million posts on Instagram with the hashtag #me.

We've even invented the selfie-stick for picture takers with short arms. Now you can pose at a better angle. Our former President took selfies in the White House.

In fact, the selfie has even gone out-of-this-world. A Japanese astronaut took one of the most famous selfies of all-time, during a space walk. This is galactic boasting.

A selfie is a modernized, digitized, visualized boast.

And what if Paul and the Corinthians had possessed this technology, and could've done their boasting with selfies? What would their Instagram have looked like?

The false teachers in Corinth would've snapped selfies of themselves riding in their limos, and wearing designer jeans, and preaching on-stage to packed auditoriums, and laying hands on the sick, and collecting enormous offerings, and posing with other celebrity pastors...

Whereas Paul's selfies would've been quite different.

Look at his Instagram... there's Paul in the middle of the ocean, with broken timbers from the shipwreck and sharks circling, [#spreadingthegospel](#)... there he is holding his camera out of a pile of stones after he'd been brutally pelted, [#rockn4jesus](#)... here Paul snaps a selfie in chains, behind bars, [#prisonagain](#)... And Paul at a riot caused by his preaching, [#stillworthit](#)... And Pastor Paul relaxing on a typical Monday, [#ministryisnot4sissys](#)...

You get the idea... Paul's selfies would've been very different from the selfies taken by the false teachers.

Here was two types of boasting. The Corinthian "super apostles" boasted in what the world would deem *marks of success* - whereas, Paul boasted in his sufferings - what appeared to be *weakness and loss and defeat*.

The false teachers pointed to *self-sanctioned awards* as proof of their apostleship - whereas Paul boasted in *his scars* as proof of his calling as a minister of Jesus.

Paul had discovered the liberating truth that as a Christian we are strong when we are weak. For it's in our weakness, that God's strength works on our behalf, and we learn that His grace is sufficient for all that we need.

With this in mind let's pick up Paul's very emotional defense in 12:11. He writes to the Corinthians, "I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me."

It went against Paul's grain to spend any time at all posting selfies - talking about himself and his exploits.

Boasting felt so foolish to Paul... *anything we do for Jesus pales in comparison to what Jesus has done for us*. But Paul was forced to boast... he blames it on the Corinthians... He says, "*you have compelled me.*"

Their attacks on the *messenger* were threatening to taint the *glory of the message*. If Paul's calling was questionable, then the Gospel would be held suspect.

Paul boasted not to advance himself, but to defend the gospel of grace, and to proclaim its authenticity.

He continues, “For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing.” Rather than having to prove himself to the Corinthians, this church should’ve been appreciative of what Paul had done for them.

Amidst much persecution and opposition Paul planted the church in Corinth. He’d lived there for 18 months, sewing tents by day, and preaching the Gospel by night.

The Corinthians should’ve admired and emulated Paul’s selfless service, *but they were into selfies*. And the false apostles took the better selfies. They knew how to ham it up for the camera. They had the more spiritual pose. They took the prettier picture. They were more religiously photogenic. Paul was humble and a servant.

In reality, the false teachers in Corinth had nothing on Paul. It’s not that Paul saw himself as all that, but the false teachers were empty suits. They were all show.

He sarcastically calls them what they arrogantly called themselves, “most eminent apostles” - in the original language it’s “super apostles” - yet they had nothing on Paul. In a comparison of apostolic chops Paul exceeded them in every way. He possessed the real bonafides.

He mentions his qualifications in verse 12, “Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.” While Paul was in Corinth rather than proclaim he was an apostle, he let his actions do the talking...

Read Acts 18, of Paul’s time in Corinth - he reasoned

persuasively, he labored tirelessly, God spoke to him supernaturally (in a night vision or dream).

Apparently, while he was there his ministry yielded “*signs and wonders and mighty deeds.*” What exactly happened we’re not told, but based on his letters I’m sure spiritual gifts played a part - like healings, and the working of miracles, and faith, and discerning of spirits.

One of the marks of an apostle in the early church was the presence of miracles in a man’s ministry.

The apostles were the first generation guys who walked with Jesus. When it came to leadership in the Church they were Jesus’ direct successors. Don’t be surprised that the bar was raised higher for these men.

That’s why the first Christians saw supernatural displays as God’s confirmation of an apostle. Miracles were divine evidence. *And on that basis no one doubted Paul’s credibility.* His resume of miracles was far more exhaustive than the empty boasts of the false teachers in Corinth. Paul’s credits put them to shame.

He continues in verse 13, “*For what is it in which you were inferior to (or my treatment of you was less than that of) other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? (Oh!) Forgive me this wrong!*”

Paul's pen is now dripping with sarcasm.

The only thing these “*super apostles*” did among the Corinthians that Paul didn’t do, was take their money. Paul is saying, “*Forgive me for not ripping you off.*”

In early Christianity it was an apostolic privilege to live off the financial support of the local churches.

Yet while in Corinth Paul passed on the privilege.

Rather than take a salary from the church, he made tents with a friend. He lived off his blue-collar wages.

In fact, he took financial support from other churches so he could minister freely to the Corinthians. He didn't want pleas for money to cast a cloud on his motives.

Yet rather than appreciate Paul's concerns *his critics had spun it differently*. They said he didn't collect an offering because he wasn't worthy of their support.

He had no right to take apostolic support since he wasn't a legitimate apostle. They put Paul down for the very reasons he should've been applauded. Unlike the *false prophets* who liked to *profit* - Paul had integrity.

Paul says in verse 14, **“Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you.”** Paul planned a third visit to Corinth, and he wasn't after their money - *only their hearts...* **“I do not seek yours, but you.”**

Realize, there are two approaches to ministry...

Some pastors feel the congregation exists for them. They would never say it, or admit it - but in a thousand subtle ways this is what they communicate day to day.

The church is there to pay the pastor what he thinks he deserves - to fulfill the pastor's dreams of grandeur and greatness. The church becomes *his* empire, a testament to

his ministerial greatness. It's *his* church!

But there *are* pastors with a different approach. They live to serve the congregation. They exist for the people - it's not the people who exist for them. They're there to serve, and give, and love, and teach, and help.

They realize that the church belongs to Jesus. It's His bride, and they would never take advantage of the Bride of Christ. A faithful pastor is content to live in the background, and remain a humble groomsman.

And Paul had this kind of groomsman-like attitude.

He writes, "For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children." And here is where all four of my kids are biblical, godly kids.

This is how they think. *Let's invite mom and dad to dinner tonight, because dad always picks up the check.*

I understand, I've done it with my own dad.

The father is the one who who scrapes, and saves, and sacrifices for his kids - not vice versa. Parents *lay up* - and *pay up* - for their kids. The flip-side is that my children will one day do the same for their own kids.

Which reminds me of the four kids who decided to chip in, and buy their dad a nice Father's Day present.

One of them suggested, "Let's get dad a gift we all can get something out of?" They all agreed it was a great idea, so they pitched in and bought him a wallet.

Here's the best definition I've heard of a father, "He's a man who now carries pictures where he once carried his money." Paul is stating, *it's parents who support their kids - it's not the*

kids who support their parents.

And what's true of a parent is reality for a pastor. A true pastor will have the heart of a father toward his congregation. He sees ministry as a means to serve the people he loves, not a way to be served by them.

*I love **verse 14**...* I've been a pastor now for 36 years, and I've been a parent for 33 years. At times I've marveled at how much I've learned about parenting from pastoring. And equally so, I've been amazed at how much I've learned about pastoring from parenting.

There are so many similarities. Both are selfless, costly, others-centered occupations. The only way to be a good dad is to take "me" out of the equation. And the only way to be a good pastor is to do the same.

Of course, I'm sure you've seen the bumper sticker on the luxury car that reads, "**We're spending our children's inheritance.**" Or the message plastered on the back of the Winnebago, "**Sorry Kids, it's all spent.**"

That's a parent who decided to defy convention.

And this was certainly the motto of the false teachers in Corinth. It should've been engraved on their Bibles.

They were spending the family of God's inheritance.

The exorbitant salaries and expense accounts of the false teachers were crippling the church's progress.

And Paul would have nothing of it. He understood the only reason a man should get involved in Christian ministry is to see other believers mature in their faith.

The church is no place for spiritual entrepreneurs who's goal is to build a name for themselves - or to make a buck off God. *A pastor is like a good dad.*

This is why Paul concludes, “**And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls...**” Pastor Paul was willing to drain his life away on these Corinthians. He would gladly “**spend and be spent**” to better their souls.

Paul loved the Corinthians so much he would exhaust his resources - and burn his last ounce of energy - even sacrifice his health and his future - to see the souls of the Corinthians flower and flourish.

Again, this is the heart of a true pastor. And when you find a person like this, support him - follow him.

Did you know that pastors are like garden hoses! Some are like **sprayers** and some are like **soakers**.

A hose with a sprayer directs the water to a specified spot. Press the handle and it increases or decreases the strength of the flow. Tighten the sprayer and you can adjust the flow wider or narrower. But you are in control. You manipulate focus, and volume, and radius.

Whereas, a soaker is a hose with perforations. It has holes over the length of the hose. Water just flows. You snake it through the garden and water oozes from it indiscriminately. It's no longer the one holding the hose that's in control. A soaker has no choice but to leak.

And I think Paul was **a soaker**, not a *sprayer*.

He wasn't a career oriented pastor - where his efforts were

limited to a time and a place. It wasn't a job to Paul, where he paced himself - a little here, a little there - so it best benefited him over the long run.

No, Paul's goal was to throw himself into whatever God had him doing at the time - *spend and be spent*. "*Lord, just put me in the garden and just let me soak.*"

Paul's attitude was to give, and give, and give some more. "*Lord, let me serve. Let me help wherever I'm at and however I can. Let me bleed out for Jesus' sake.*"

Are you a **sprayer** or a **soaker**?

Will you serve the Lord, but only in the narrow ways that you can control? Are there limits to how far you'll go and to what you'll do for Jesus? Are you focused on reaching just certain types of people. *You a sprayer?*

Or are you willing to be uncoiled in the place God puts you, and just soak - seep out the love of Jesus to anyone and everyone who's nearby. Are you willing to love indiscriminately as God sees fit? *You a soaker?*

I want to be a soaker for Jesus' sake. I hope you do too! Let's "*gladly spend and be spent for Jesus sake...*"

But again, that wasn't the Corinthian's attitude.

Paul groans, "*though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.*" Rather than *soakers* the Corinthians were *sponges*. Rather than seep out love, they sucked up Paul's love, and refused to reciprocate.

They were takers, rather than givers.

These folks were the beneficiaries of Paul's ministry in a thousand ways, but they failed to acknowledge his

contributions. They took Paul's ministry for granted.

The Corinthians were the ungrateful children of a generous and sacrificial parent. They were blessed to have Paul as their spiritual father, but they failed to even respect him, let alone be thankful for him...

And if you're a parent, I'm sure you know how he felt... It's a kid's tendency to take parents for granted.

And sadly, some churches have the same attitude toward their spiritual leaders. This was the Corinthians.

Some of you might know that October is *pastor appreciation month*. It's a rather recent invention.

In fact, I use to scoff at the idea. *"Let's not put pastors on a pedestal."* But then I logged a few years as a pastor... and let me tell you, today I'll take every bit of encouragement and appreciation I can get.

I've gotten grateful letters I carry around with me in my briefcase, just in case I need a quick pick-me-up.

Pastor is a tough job. It helps to know people are praying for you and appreciate what you're trying to do.

Paul writes in verse 16, *"But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning!"* Again, Paul is being sarcastic.

His critics had accused Paul of being *"crafty,"* or devious, but his critics were the ones being cunning.

They were saying, *"Yea Paul, comes across sincere, and says he doesn't want anything from you - but he's really just setting you up - he's trying to gain your confidence, so he can*

take advantage of you later.”

But Paul asks, “Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you?” It was a rhetorical question.

The answer was obviously, “No.” Paul and everyone who had ever represented him had been above-board.

Nothing in how Paul had handled himself in the past justified that he would act unscrupulously in the future.

He writes, “I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps?”

Not once did *Paul or his pals* manipulate or intimidate anyone. They had the same loving attitude.

“Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification.” Their only motive was to edify - *that is, to build up* - the Corinthians.

Paul goes on in verse 20 “For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish...”

Paul is hoping the Corinthians are living holy lives. The Corinthians are hoping Paul will be a tolerant guest. But they were both *just fishing for what they were wishing*. A serious conflict was on the horizon...

It was about to get ugly!

If the Corinthians were living in sin, as Paul had heard, he was going to have to bust their chops. Such behavior was a poor witness. Rather than a happy visit, he'd be forced to

issue a stern rebuke - exercise some discipline. *A showdown was brewing in Corinth.*

And I need to tell you... I hope I don't burst your bubble, but sometimes church life gets ugly. Christians don't always handle difficult situations *like Christians.*

Don't forget Christians are *redeemed people - saved people - forgiven people - even changed people...* but none of us are *perfect people.* God never promises perfection in this life - *not in these fleshly bodies - not in this wicked world.* Today, we're a work in progress.

That means at times we'll struggle with hurt feelings, and express ourselves awkwardly, and fail to be as sensitive as we should be. On occasion, all humans, even Christians, *open their lips and shoot from the hip.*

Go back to the illustration of parents and children.

Do parents always keep their cool? Do kids make statements they later regret? Do family members have to eat humble pie and apologize? Of course they do.

Sometimes in the name of love families just have to live with a little unresolved tension. Family life can get ugly and messy, even for families that love each other.

Why would church life be any different?

I've been among spiritual giants, godly men. *And it still got ugly. Tempers flared. Harsh words were said.*

Sometimes the circumstances are so complexed and the issues so murky that a little ugliness is inevitable.

I hate it when it happens. I do all I can to prevent it. I pray

I'm not the cause of it - but at times Christians get mad, and confused, and upset and act ugly toward one another. You'd think we'd always mind our Ps and Qs, but on occasion the wheels come off - and only time, and patience, and grace can repair the damage.

When it happens, don't be shocked. Don't question the Gospel's power. Just take a deep breath - recall *our humanity* and *God's mercy* - and long for heaven.

And Paul was afraid his visit to Corinth was headed for this kind of ugliness - especially if the Corinthians continued in the following... **“lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults...”**

“Contentions” are quarrels, donnybrooks, rhubarbs.

“Jealousies...” *Why is he an elder and not me? Why wasn't I asked? How come she gets to sing every Sunday?* My oh my, jealousies even come to church!

“Outbursts of wrath...” That's what Paul calls it when it occurs among church leaders. When it's two toddlers we call it a temper-tantrum - *but it's the same thing.*

“Selfish ambitions” among Christians? God forbid. But He doesn't just forbid - it's our choice to make...

God knows we all have selfish ambitions, and we have to be willing to lay aside our agenda for *the greater good*, for *the sake of unity*, for *the glory of God.*

“Backbitings...” isn't just a problem in the nursing.

This is why Christians wear shirts and sometimes jackets -

they cover the teeth marks... When you're *shocked* to hear the derogatory thing someone said about you, please remember what you said about me.

I'm the pastor - the target. Don't tell me you've never criticized a sermon, or a decision, or made a comment about the pastor? I've got bites marks on my back, *yet I still come to church.* I haven't given up, and neither should you. Let's all knock-off the backbiting...

And "*whisperings*" or rumor spreading. *Why is it some of our prayer requests sound like juicy gossip?*

Avoid the hushed conversations - the "*whisperings.*" If you can't say what you think loudly; then don't say it.

Paul also fears "*conceits*" among the Corinthians.

The word means "*inflating or swelling.*" Paul is afraid the Corinthians have gotten the big-head. They're swollen with pride. They think more of themselves than they should. *I fear this for myself. It occurs so easily.*

You can become *proud* of your humility. I'll never forget the Christian musicians who had the tongue-in-cheek name, "*The Fabulous Humble Brothers.*"

Humility is the most elusive virtue. It's when you think you've obtained it, it's certain that you haven't.

And lastly, Paul was afraid of "*tumults*" or "*chaos.*"

The Corinthians had already shown this tendency. From 1 Corinthians we learned this church *created divisions, tolerated immorality, took their disputes to pagan courts, misunderstood marriage, misinterpreted Christian liberty,*

violated gender roles, and abused spiritual gifts... and that was all in one Sunday!

This is what Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was all about. He wrote to set in order a tumultuous church.

And remember the pinnacle of his instructions. When we think of 1 Corinthians and its 16 chapters which one stands out? Chapter 13 - *without love you ain't nothing.*

Understand love is the cure for all that Paul fears. He was worried about *"Contentions"* but *"love is kind."*

"Jealousies" but *"love does not envy."*

"Outbursts of wrath" but *"love doesn't behave rudely"*

"Selfish ambitions" but *"love does not seek its own."*

"Backbitings" but *"love is not provoked."*

"Whisperings" but *"love thinks no evil."*

"Conceits" but *"love is not puffed up."*

"Tumults" but *"love suffers long."* Corinth like every church, had a whole litany of problems, but the only one that would be their death knell was *a lack of love.*

I'm sure that Paul was praying that the Corinthian's love for one another would be restored. And that's what I'm praying for our church - *that we love one another.*

Paul closes with His greatest fear, *"Lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you..."*

If Paul comes to Corinth - *to a church he led to Christ, and disciplined for nearly two years - and still practically pastored -* and he finds them selfish and unloving, and immoral he'll be embarrassed - *humbled.*

I doubt if it's ever been a motivation for you, but perhaps you should consider it... *when the other pastors and churches travel in for our various conferences do you care about the church they find?*

Do you want your pastors embarrassed by a chaotic, selfish, carnal church... *Humbled before their peers.*

What if someone said, *“Why is Pastor Sandy hosting a conference for church leaders when his own church is so spiritually anemic?”* That's exactly what Paul feared folks would be said about him, after they visited the Corinthians. He hoped he wasn't humbled by them.

And then he writes, *“And I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.”* He's talking about the brothers and sisters in Corinth who were still caught up in sexual sin.

Paul says he'll *“mourn”* for them, not because they fell into sin - all Christians are capable of back-sliding - *but because they refuse to repent.* They don't want to change. They like their sin. They're happy in their sin.

And this is the issue for us. Not the fact we sin, but are we willing to confess it and ask God to change us.

The Greek word Paul uses - that translates *“mourn”* describes *“mourning for the dead.”* And this is how Paul sees the person who's gotten comfortable in their sin - they're dead to God - they're *the walking dead.*

Paul doesn't want his next visit to Corinth to be a wake for a dead church. He wants to find *fellowship* not a *funeral.* He

wants their reunion to be a celebration.

Let me sum up this morning's text with a few overarching thoughts. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is unique. It's not a dissertation in theology and doctrine. It's not practical lessons on Christian living. In this letter, Paul pours out his heart. He gets personal with the Corinthians in a way he doesn't anywhere else. **And the big take away... he cared!**

Unlike the false teachers in Corinth Paul took Christian ministry seriously. He had a parent's heart for the people in the church. He hurt when they hurt. He rejoiced when they rejoiced. It really mattered to Paul.

And likewise, our church should matter to us.

Pastor Kent Hughes writes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, "Love the church, serve her, spend and be spent, seek souls, and your heart will know an index of fears unknown to the uncommitted heart. But you will also know joys that are unknown to the self-serving."

If you want a rich, deep, meaningful life... you've got to *care enough to hurt - risk enough to rejoice - even endures the ugliness*. You've got to **stop snapping selfies**, and think of others, especially your church.

Billy Graham once said, "The smallest person I ever saw was a man wrapped wholly in himself." Let's stop *our* boasts, and start boasting in what matters to God.