

'SINCERITY & PURITY'
2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-15

[St Mark's Northbridge, All Services, Sunday, November 8, 2020]

1. Corinth Decides.

This past week as US citizens went to the polls to elect a new President, a lot of the reporting of the election was under the heading "America Decides". And it's similar here in our own country, isn't it? On election days when you get 8-10 hours election coverage on the TV, often the program is called "Australia Decides" or something along those lines. And, of course, what we're deciding about is leadership. When we go to an election, we're making a decision about who we want to lead us.

And that was the issue facing the Corinthians too. We could perhaps give this chapter the title "Corinth Decides". The Corinthian church was in the middle of a leadership contest. On the one side was the Apostle Paul- the author of this letter. On the other side was the group of alternative leaders Paul refers to, somewhat sarcastically I might add, as the 'super-apostles'. They both wanted the Corinthians' affection and loyalty. They both wanted to influence the Corinthians' faith. But the Corinthians had to decide. They couldn't honour both. The Corinthians needed to make a decision about who they would ultimately listen to, who they would look to to lead them. And it's into that dilemma that Paul wrote this concluding section of his letter.

Last week we saw in chapter 10 how Paul responds to the accusations that had been made about him, and how he puts forward to the Corinthians a clear pattern of what authentic Christian leadership should look like. In many respects, it's more of the same here in chapter 11. Except now we find him being much explicit and firm about the danger he believes the super-apostles pose to the Corinthians' faith.

So in today's/tonight's sermon I thought we'd look at our passage by comparing the two different kinds of leadership that the Corinthians to make a decision about. So, what does Paul say here about the super-apostles, his opponents? And then what does Paul say here about himself and his own ministry? These are our two headings this morning/evening.

2. The Super-Apostles.

So let me begin with the "super-apostles". These are the rival leaders who've turned up in Corinth and who've been influencing the church there. And Paul says five things about them here that I think we ought to notice.

- preaching a different gospel

Firstly, Paul says in verse 5 that these rival apostles are preaching a different gospel. He says that they're preaching a Jesus other than the Jesus Paul preached. And by saying this Paul is making it clear how high the stakes are! He doesn't think these other leaders are just spruiking a different emphasis. He doesn't think they've just got some funky distinctives around the edge of the Christian faith. No, he thinks the differences between him and them are core. They're absolutely fundamental. Interestingly, Paul doesn't go into more detail here about what his rivals are teaching, but he certainly makes it clear that the differences really matter. Different gospel. Different Spirit. Different Jesus. The stakes couldn't be higher.

- criticising Paul

But the second thing we learn here about the super-apostles is that they're criticising Paul. We saw this in chapter 10 last week, as well, didn't we? And from what we can piece together here, the criticisms include that he's not a very eloquent speaker- verse 6¹, and that he doesn't charge people for his ministry- verse 7. Of course it's not easy to work out why that latter accusation might be seen as a negative. But there are reasons to believe that back then, people thought that when it came to speakers or teachers, you got what you paid for. The best ones were the most expensive. People often think similar things today. But whatever the reasons may be for the criticism, this too was one of the ways the rival leaders were trying to undermine Paul.

- vying for the Corinthians' loyalty

And, of course, this was all part of them vying for the Corinthians' loyalty. And this is my third point under this heading. Listen again to verse 12.

[Read 11:12]

Paul's rivals want an opportunity to be considered equal with him, at least in the things they boast about- presumably things that Paul may not value as highly as they do.

- serving Satan

Now I guess those first three things which Paul says about the super-apostles are not that surprising. But in the last paragraph of our section today/tonight things escalate very quickly. In these last two points Paul really ramps up his assessment of his opponents. Because the next thing he says is that they're serving Satan. Verse 13.

[Read 11:13-15a]

¹ See also 10:10.

When he referred to these other leaders in verse 5 as ‘super-apostles’ he was giving them an ironic name. But now he drops any hint of playfulness and sarcasm. Now he calls them what he thinks they really are: false apostles. In fact, they are deceitful. They may want to be equal with Paul but he says they’re pretenders. They’re masquerading as apostles. And he points out that evil masquerading as good is the normal MO of Satan himself. And these false apostles are walking in Satan’s footsteps. They’re serving Satan.

- facing God’s judgement

And so, and this is my fifth point, they’re facing God’s judgement. The last line of verse 15 says that their end will be what their actions deserve. By pretending to be angels of light, but really leading people away from Jesus, Paul believes they deserve the wrath of God. And it’s the wrath of God they will one day meet.

Paul’s assessment of the super-apostles is not ambiguous is it? Nor would we say it’s mild. His words here do not amount to a gentle correction. No- Paul is saying it like it is. Because what’s at stake in the lives of the Corinthians matters far too much for him to mince his words, or to tread lightly. He believes that these false apostles pose a grave spiritual danger to the Corinthians. And so he’s sought to expose them in no uncertain terms.

3. Paul.

But at the same time, running right through this chapter, Paul exposes himself too. Because he doesn’t just talk about his leadership rivals. He also wants the Corinthians to know what his own leadership looks like. And I just want to direct your eyes to six things Paul says here about himself.

- jealous

And the first thing he says is that he’s jealous for the Corinthians. Let me read again from verse 1.

[Read 11:1-2]

In actual fact Paul thinks this comparison between himself and the super-apostles is wearisome and he suggests in verse 1, that it may even be a foolish exercise²- again with some sarcasm I think. But he asks the Corinthians nevertheless to humour him as he says these things. Of course, he wants them to do a lot more than just humour him.

Because when he chooses the word ‘jealous’ he reveals the intensity of how he feels. And he’s likening himself here to a father who wants to give his daughter away as a bride. And he wants to be able to give her away as a pure virgin. The point of the metaphor is that Paul wants to lead the Corinthians into the intimacy and goodness of a relationship with

² Here, perhaps, Paul answers the foolish super-apostles according to their own folly (see Proverbs 26:5).

Christ. But he wants them to be faithful to Christ. He doesn't want them to wander. He doesn't want them to be like a bride who sleeps with someone other than her fiancé before the wedding. It's in this sense that he's jealous for them. He longs for them to be loyal to Christ. And his jealousy is godly because it's not selfish. It wants what's best for them. And it wants what's best for Christ. But it wants it fiercely.

And I have to say that I think this is one of the most profound pictures of Christian leadership anywhere in the New Testament. It resonates with me personally a great deal. Because this is how I feel about all of you- a fierce and very protective longing- a longing to see you give yourselves to Christ. But I'm not the first pastor to feel that way. Because what we see here once again is the nature of all true Christian leadership. One suspects the super-apostles couldn't honestly say something like this. But Paul can.

- anxious

And that's why he feels anxious when they're in danger. This is the second thing. Listen again to verse 3.

[Read 11:3]

The word 'minds' there is actually, in the original, the word 'thoughts'. And I think that's significant because of what we read last week in 10:5. Paul's vision of the mature Christian life is of every thought we have being in obedience to Christ. But here he says, he's worried that their thoughts may've been led astray. Just like Eve had her thoughts led astray by the wily deceit of the serpent in the garden of Eden. This is what Paul is anxious about- that the Corinthians may find themselves being led away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

- knowledgeable

But the third thing he says about himself here is in response to the criticism he mentions in verse 6- the suggestion that he's not an eloquent speaker. And in actual fact, Paul seems quite happy to concede that criticism. But he also wants to suggest that content matters much more than delivery. Paul says- he knows what he's talking about. He has knowledge. So even if he doesn't speak in a way that's quite as impressive as the false apostles do, at least you know with him that there's real substance to his teaching.

- humble

And the fourth thing he says about himself here is also in response to criticism- this time the criticism he's facing for offering his ministry for free. And once again Paul doesn't deny that this is the case. But he points out that this is something to be appreciated about his ministry, not something to be despised. Because it speaks to his humility amongst them. Verse 7.

[Read 11:7-9]

Paul's ministry in Corinth was generously supported by the saints in Macedonia and by his own hard work making tents³. Of course, Paul knew he could've asked the Corinthians to support him⁴. But he chose to forgo that right in order to bring them the gospel freely. In this he lowered himself, that they might be lifted up. That's humility. It's a ministry of grace that reflects the gospel of grace he preached. It's a ministry of selfless service that imitates the pattern of Christ's own selfless service.

- loving

And then fifthly he speaks of 'love'. Verse 10.

[Read 11:10-11]

Just as we saw in chapter 10, Paul uses the word boasting in a positive way as a contrast to the boasting of the false-apostles. They likely boasted in different things, more worldly things. But Paul boasts in his humility! He boasts that he has served the Corinthians in order not to be a burden to them. And he's done so because of the love for them that fills his heart.

- persevering

And this humble love Paul has for the Corinthians will continue. This is the 6th thing he says here. He plans to keep persevering in it. Verse 12.

[Read 11:12]

Paul can see that his best chance of commending himself to the Corinthians and demonstrating the falsehood of those who oppose him is to just keep loving them humbly as he's always done. In the end this will be the best way to distinguish himself from those who are merely masquerading as apostles.

And sisters and brothers, before we move on today we should once again stop and notice the picture of true leadership that emerges here. And in this context we're being reminded that, in the end, godly leadership will always distinguish itself from the leadership of those who are in it for themselves. This is Paul's model for us. And our whole church family ought to esteem it. This is the leadership our church needs. This is the leadership we ought to value, and pray for, and aspire to. It's a leadership marked by intense longing for faithfulness, by an anxious concern for people's spiritual welfare, by a commitment to carefully sharing the true knowledge of the gospel, by humble service, by sincere love, and by steadfast perseverance.

³ See Acts 18:3.

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 9.

4. Northbridge Decides.

But once again today/tonight, I don't want to only reflect on the nature of Christian leadership. Of course, what godly leadership looks like is a major theme in these chapters and we do well to pay careful attention to it. But at the end of the day Christian leadership matters only because the faithful discipleship of every Christian matters. And these chapters also give us a wise insight into what it means to be a disciple of Christ. So as we finish this morning/evening, I want to reflect with you on two things I think these verses teach us. The importance of discernment. And the importance of devotion.

- discernment

So firstly, discernment. At its heart, this is what these verses call every Christian to. When it comes to leadership we need to be discerning. This is our responsibility every time we vote in an election. But it's our responsibility as Christians as well- both inside and outside the church. Because just as the Corinthians had to decide, so do the saints in Northbridge. Who will you follow? Who will you listen to? Who will you look to to lead you⁵?

Will you esteem godly leaders, even if they're less impressive than others? Will you esteem those who will care for your souls jealously, even if that sometimes leads them to challenge or unsettle you? Will you esteem those who have the knowledge of God even if they don't always communicate it in the most eloquent way? Will you esteem those who humbly serve rather than those who seek honour for themselves? Will you esteem those who love you rather than those who are simply fulfilling a role? And will you esteem those who don't feel the need to change the ministry in order to keep up with what other leaders or churches are doing, but who are content to simply keep doing what God has called them to?

This needs discernment. Because the world esteems very different things in leaders. And it's tempting for us to think in worldly ways when it comes to leadership. The Corinthians faced that temptation then, and we face it now. We can be seduced into valuing charisma, and experience, and presentation, and personality more than we value the character of Christ and the faithful service of his gospel. And this is relevant in a number of contexts. It's relevant to how we listen to sermons in church. And it's relevant to how we feel about those who lead us- in Youth Group or Kids Church or Home Groups. And it's relevant to what we pray for our leaders. And it's relevant to what we say when we're in conversations with people from other churches about what their church does and how their leaders lead. And it's relevant to how we choose the Christian leaders we engage with as we read books, and listen to online sermons and podcasts as well. This is a real issue for us. We need the kind of clarity about leadership which these chapters offer us. We need discernment.

⁵ This is the question Paul asks in verses 1-4 when he ironically asks them to 'put up with him' (v.1) but also expresses his concern about how easily they are 'putting up' with the false apostles (v.4).

- devotion

But discernment about leadership is not an end itself. If leadership matters because discipleship matters, then discernment matters because devotion matters. What we value in our leaders is important because God has given us our leaders to help us grow in Christ. And that's the most important thing of all. And Paul captures what it means to grow in Christ with a beautiful phrase at the end of verse 3. What he's really worried about for the Corinthians is that they might be somehow led astray from their 'sincere and pure devotion to Christ'. And that's what's at stake for us in our own attitude to leadership as well. The sincerity and purity that we have in Christ⁶.

They're evocative words aren't they? And this morning/evening they invite us to consider whether our devotion to Christ is sincere. Is it a devotion that's just for other people to see? Or is it true in the secret places of our hearts? Do we trust in God's sovereign goodness just when things are going well, or do we trust him no matter what life throws at us? Do we want to live a righteous life because we know it's what all the other Christians expect of us, or because we really want to please our Father in Heaven? Do we love him genuinely and serve him with a glad heart? Or are we ourselves masquerading as Christians? Is our devotion to Christ marked by sincerity?

And is it also marked by purity? Or is our devotion dogged by spiritual hesitation? Or by compromise- whether public or private? Or by stray thoughts? Or by unfaithfulness- whether quiet or rebellious?

Of course, none of us can answer all of those questions the way we wished we could. Which is why we fall back again and again on the mercy of Jesus. That phrase at the end of verse 3 really does offer us an attractive picture of what it means to follow Christ. And we really ought to let it stir up our desires for this way of life. But we also need to remember that the Christ we follow is endlessly patient. And he knows our weakness. He knows the frailty of our hearts. He knows all our insincerity and all our impurity, and he loves us still. And that is why he is so worthy of our devotion. Because he is first sincere and pure in his devotion to us. How wonderful is that?

And it's in fixing our eyes on that, on him, that we find our own devotion growing. It's as we see his sincerity that our devotion becomes more sincere. It's as we gaze on his purity that we become more pure.

My desire for myself today/tonight, and for you, is captured well by what Paul says in verse 2.

[Read 11:2]

⁶ This is a more literal translation of the end of verse 4 since the word 'devotion' is not actually there in the Greek.