

2 Corinthians - Commentaries by Frank Binford Hole

2 Corinthians: Briefly Expounded, 2 Corinthians 11 (11:1-33)

IN THE LIGHT of the coming day, when the Lord will commend His servants, the commendation of oneself in the presence of one's fellows appears to be but folly. Paul acknowledges this in the first verse of our chapter. He had been speaking about himself in the previous chapter, and he goes on to do so more fully in the chapter before us, but all with a view to assuring the Corinthians of the reality and genuineness of his apostolic mission. He pleads guilty to this "folly" and asks them to bear with him in it.

There was indeed a very good reason for it. His detractors brought their charges and insinuations against him not merely out of opposition to himself. There was an ulterior motive. They depreciated Paul because they aimed thereby at undermining, in the minds of the Corinthians, the truth of the Gospel that he had brought them. They would overthrow Paul's credit as a preliminary step towards overthrowing the Gospel that he preached, and that accomplished, Christ would lose His pre-eminent place in their hearts.

The thought of this stirred the Apostle very deeply. Elijah had been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts in his day, and here we find Paul jealous with a jealousy which was of God on behalf of Christ. When the Gospel he preached is truly received, it fairly wins the heart of the convert for Christ, so really so that he could say, "I have espoused you... that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (ch. 11:2). This is figurative language, but it is quite transparent as to its meaning. Paul so preached, and we all ought so to preach, that the hearts of those who believe are wholly captivated by Christ. But that is only the beginning.

We should also make it our aim, as Paul did, that each convert might retain this single-eyed devotedness to Christ all through life until the moment arrives for presentation to Christ in glory. Each believing heart should wear the "chaste virgin" character, untouched and unsullied by any other master-passion or absorbing love. Alas! how few of us bear that character in any measure. How many there are who are easily diverted from Him, and spend much of their energy in pursuit of other loves! It is possible to turn from Him to pursue things which are really quite opposed to Him; but to turn from Him to pursue things subsidiary to Him, and therefore quite good in their way, is an even greater snare. May God help us to beware of it.

Verse 3 is very important as exposing before us the way in which the great adversary lays the snare for our feet. In chapter 4 we were instructed as to the way in which he blinds the minds of those who believe not. Here we find that when some have believed, and so as to them his blinding tactics have failed, he is still pertinaciously active and aims at beguiling them, as once he beguiled Eve. When he acts with subtlety as the serpent he is more dangerous than when he opposes as a roaring lion.

The devil in the guise of a serpent deceived Eve in a very subtle and crafty way. Step by step he corrupted her mind as to God, and led her to act apart from and independently of her husband. In similar fashion he works today. He aims at diverting us from simplicity and from true subjection to Christ. The rendering of the New Translation is, "your thoughts should be corrupted from simplicity as to the Christ" (ch. 11:3).

The words, "corrupted from simplicity," (ch. 11:3) are very suggestive, and worth pondering deeply. In man's world things proceed from the simple to the complex. The earliest printing machines, for instance, were very simple affairs. In the course of several centuries they have become marvelous machines of great complexity. So in the ordinary way, confining ourselves to the affairs of men, we should speak of things being developed and improved from their original simplicity. But here we are dealing with what is extraordinary and outside the affairs of men. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are His ways our ways. It is well to get this firmly settled in our souls.

The works and ways of God are marked by simplicity. His simplicity is perfect. We cannot improve upon it. We may attempt to alter it, but then we only corrupt it. The Gospel is the essence of simplicity. It sets Christ before us as the One who is the expression of all that God has to say to us, as also He is the One who has wrought the necessary work of redemption, and in whom we now stand before God. It brings us into complete subjection to Him. But Satan is a master of craft and subtlety. Using these men who were the opponents of Paul, he did not totally deny the Christ whom Paul preached. Verse 4 is clear evidence of this. If they could have come with another gospel, announcing another Jesus, and conferring another spirit, there might have been something to say on their behalf, especially if it could have been an improvement on what they had already received.

Instead of denying Christ they came under the pretense of adding something to Christ. A fuller idea of their position may be gleaned from the epistle to the Galatians, where we find them adding the law to Christ: teaching that, though we may be justified by Him, we are put under the law in order that holiness may be promoted. That Christ should be made righteousness to us they were prepared to admit, but that He should also be made sanctification seemed to them much too simple.

It is not otherwise today. The tendency to hanker after the elaborate, the abstruse, the complicated, the far-fetched is always with us. The intellectual men of the world find the Gospel far too simple, and they stumble at it. The trouble is however that believers, whose strong point is their intellect, always have a tendency in the same direction, unless they walk in the spirit of self-judgment as regards intellectualism. If they do not maintain self-judgment, all their elaborations, their deep and abstruse thoughts, only eventuate in something that corrupts from simplicity as to the Christ.

The mind is a very important part of a man, and Satan's acutest beguilements are aimed at it. It is far from being the whole of a man: his affections and his conscience have a very large place. The trouble is that the intellectual person is very apt to give a much larger place to his mind than Scripture gives to it, and to forget that God reveals His truth to us, not for our intellectual enjoyment, but that it may command our hearts, appeal to our consciences and govern our lives. Let that be properly realized, and we at once find plenty to occupy our spiritual

energies in the profound simplicities of the truth, and any itching desire we ever had for mere complexities and novelties and obscurities forsakes us.

“Simplicity as to the Christ!” (ch. 11:3). That is what we need. To know Him: to love Him, as united in heart to Him: to adore Him: to serve Him: that is it! If our minds are thus stayed upon Him in uncorrupted simplicity, all else will be added unto us, and we shall be maintained in the fervor of “first love.” It was just at this point that decline set in, as witnessed in Rev. 2:4. So here: Paul knew well that if Satan succeeded in his beguiling’s at this point, he would succeed all along the line.

So, once more, in defending his Gospel from the subtle attack of Satan through men who were, however unwittingly, serving him, he had to make plain the reality and power of his apostleship in contrast to features that marked them. He was indeed an apostle, and not in the least inferior to those who were most prominent among the twelve.

From verses 6 to 9 we gather that the Apostle had been belittled not only because his speech was not highly polished but because he had taken no monetary help from the Corinthians whilst amongst them. In alluding to this his language was tinged with irony. He had abased himself in order to exalt them. Was this an offense, a sin? He had accepted help from other churches, notably the Macedonian, and he speaks of this as robbing, or spoiling, them—still the language of irony, of course. He had done the Corinthians the greatest possible service without the least cost to themselves. And he boasted thus, not in the spirit of emulation as though he did not love them, but just because he did love them, and he desired to deliver them from the fascination which the opposers exercised over them by reason of the foolish boasting in which they indulged so freely.

This leads the Apostle to speak with great plainness about the opposers. They were false apostles, for they never had been sent of the Lord as the true apostles were. They were workers right enough, but deceitful ones, since they transformed themselves into what they were not. In this they partook of the character of him whom they served, and according to their deceitful works will be their end.

It is very important that we should remember that Satan so commonly transforms himself into an angel of light, and his servants into servants of righteousness. That being so, we must expect sin and error to frequently present themselves in a pleasing and delightful guise. Again and again we find the advocates of error to be quite nice men. It is unsafe to receive the message because the man who brings it appears so good, so charming, so eloquent, so like an angel of light. The only safe test is, Does he bring the doctrine of Christ, the true Gospel? If he does, receive it by all means, even if he is a bit uncouth, a poor speaker, or of ugly appearance. “Prince Charming” is all too often a servant of Satan in plain clothes.

Such was the character of some—if not all—of those who were opposing Paul. Hitherto he had not said much as to them, but now the time had come to stand up to them and expose them, and this he does very effectually here. They were always boasting concerning themselves, and they did it with a view to self-exaltation. They were marked by a spirit which was the exact opposite of Paul’s. He abased himself in order to exalt those whose blessing he sought (verse 7): they exalted themselves and did not scruple to exploit those whom they professed to serve. They brought them into bondage, they devoured them by getting their money, they even smote them on the face. Very possibly smiting on the face was not literal, but in the sense of being rude to them in haughty fashion, or, as we should say, browbeating them. The Corinthians being carnally-minded had evidently been impressed with their domineering manner. Had they been more spiritual they would have seen through it.

Still as these men acted in this way Paul felt that he should take up their challenge. If they wished to institute a kind of competition as to who had the highest credentials, he would speak somewhat further as to his. This boasting was all foolishness, but since they had started it he would speak, and again in verse 19 he uses irony. The Corinthians were enriched in all knowledge and so took the place of being wise, and seemed to suffer gladly the fools who boasted so much; for, he says, you do indeed suffer when these boasting men domineer over you and brow-beat you as they have been doing.

The boastings of these men apparently centered around two points: first, their natural origin as true-blooded Hebrews and Israelites, the seed of Abraham according to the flesh; second, their dignity as servants of Christ, which they claimed to be. As to the former matter, for what it is worth, Paul was not one whit behind them. He could say, “So am I” without the least hesitation.

But when it comes to the second matter he does not say, “So am I,” but rather, “I am more,” for he completely outshone them. The phrase he uses has been “I above measure so,” (ch. 11:23) for there was really no comparison between them: and he proceeds to speak, not of the triumphs he had won, but of the sufferings he had endured.

Let us take time to really digest the significance of this. Had we been in Paul’s shoes, should we not almost for a certainty have proceeded to talk of the mighty power of God that had been manifested in our service? We should have had much to say about the mighty signs and wonders that had been manifested, the striking conversions, the wonderful transformations of life and character that had been recorded. Would it have occurred to us to recount the buffetings, the troubles, the sufferings, we had endured? We think not. To tell the truth there would have been hardly anything of that sort to tell.

We are not saying that the servant of Christ should never speak of that which the Lord may have done through him in the way of blessing. There are times when he may profitably do so, as we see by reading Acts 14:27, and 15:12. We do say however that when it is a question of one’s credentials, of producing facts which prove beyond all question that one is a genuine servant of Christ, then the record of one’s sufferings is far more convincing. Signs and wonders may be produced by a power other than that of the Spirit of God: nothing but absolute devotion to the Lord will enable one to serve with patient persistence through years of toil and suffering.

There are modern religious movements whose main stock-in-trade is the recounting of the wonders they can produce, either in healings, or in tongues, or in the realm of habits and character—“life-changing” as it is called. Of fidelity to Christ, and of suffering for His Name, they have little if anything to say, for it seems non-existent in their scheme of things. They often know quite a lot about high-pressure meetings, and even first-class hotels, but nothing about the labors and perils and infirmities that marked Paul. And as for the rest of us, who do not wish to recount our own doings, successful or otherwise, how little are we like to him.

He was more than a servant of Christ, as he tells us in verse 23. He was an apostle of Christ and actively engaged in filling up “that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh” (Col. 1:24). As far as the record given to us in Scripture is concerned, he stands alone amongst the people of God in his sufferings. An Abraham, a Moses, a David, a Daniel, each had their own special and distinctive characteristics which marked them out as pleasing God, but not one of them approached Paul in this. Labors, stripes, prisons, deaths, journeyings, perils of all descriptions, weariness, painfulness, watchings, hunger, thirst, fastings, cold, nakedness, care-what a list! It covers pretty well the whole range of human suffering, whether of body or mind.

From the Acts of the Apostles we can identify a few of the experiences of which he speaks. For instance, “once was I stoned,” (ch. 11:25) that was as recorded in chapter 14. He speaks of being “in deaths oft,” and one occasion was in the riot in the Ephesian theater, recorded in chapter 19, for he speaks of this as “so great a death,” (ch. 1:10) in the first chapter of our epistle. But on the other hand we must remember that when he penned this list his experiences were not over. He had been shipwrecked thrice, one of the occasions involving a night and a day in the deep; being washed about in the waters of the Mediterranean, we suppose that means; but as yet the shipwreck recorded in Acts 27 had not taken place. That must consequently have been number four, at least.

The most wearing sufferings of all were, we venture to think, those that he speaks of last—the care of all the churches. To bear with the feebleness of the weak, to listen again and again to the complaints of the offended, to correct the foolishness of saints, and contend for the truth against false brethren, all this must have been the most testing thing of all. Yet he did it.

The incident with which he closes the chapter seems symbolic of the whole drift of his life of service. He was “let down,” and that in a very undignified way. If secular history is to be trusted the lettings-down never ceased until he knelt by the headsman’s block outside the imperial city, Rome. But it was just these lettings-down and the sufferings they involved which put upon him the brands of the Lord Jesus, and marked him out as a servant of Christ in surpassing measure.

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2 Corinthians: Briefly Expounded, 2 Corinthians 10 (10:1-18)

THE LAST FOUR CHAPTERS of this epistle are mainly concerned with matters of a more personal sort, that lay between Paul and the Corinthians. To write so much of such matters may appear to be egotism on the part of Paul. Paul himself speaks of it as his “folly” (11:1). Still what he wrote is as much inspired as the rest of the epistle, and as full of profit also. Much that is of deep importance for all saints, and for all time, is embedded in these chapters; and we gain immensely by having it presented to us, not from a theoretical standpoint, but as a matter of actual practice, worked out as between the Apostle and some of his fellow-believers.

During Paul’s absence from them, the Corinthians had been influenced and sadly misled by other workers who had visited them. Some of these may have been true but ill-instructed believers of Judaizing tendencies; but others were “deceitful workers” (ch. 11:13), real agents of Satan. Anyway they had done their best to discredit Paul, making all kinds of charges and insinuations against him. They said, for instance, that though he might be able to write “weighty and powerful” (ch. 10:10) letters, when he appeared on the scene he was weak and insignificant in appearance and his speech was uncultured and contemptible. From this they deduced that he possessed no particular authority, and his instructions might be disregarded. This particular insinuation Paul takes up and meets at the beginning of Chapter 10.

He pleads guilty, with the utmost frankness, to being “base” or “mean” in his outward appearance. He was quite undistinguished to look at: when converted he took the name Paul, which means “Little.” Now he was absent from them, and he was bold toward them. But further he expected presently to visit them, and he besought them so to carry themselves that he need not come amongst them with bold and powerful discipline which might be to their discomfiture. This he besought them by “the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (ch. 10:1)—a very delicate yet powerful lever!

Meekness is not weakness, neither is gentleness that pliable softness that can be twisted in any direction. Meekness and self-assertiveness stand in contrast to each other: so do gentleness and harshness. Meekness is a matter of character—the Lord Jesus said, “I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29) —and so it comes first. Gentleness is more a question of one’s manner. He who is meek in character will be gentle in manner. He who is self-assertive in character will be harsh in manner. Supreme meekness and supreme gentleness were found in Christ; and yet no one was bolder than He, when it was a question of maintaining the right or opposing the evil. In a very large measure the Apostle was following His steps, and hence boldness as well as meekness and gentleness were found in him.

True to this character, Paul beseeches the Corinthians rather than issuing peremptory commands to them. There were some however who thought of him as though he were a man who walked according to the flesh. This led him to give us the important statement that follows as to the character of both his walk and warfare. Verse 3 is instructive, inasmuch as both senses in which the word flesh is used are brought together in it. We walk in the flesh; that is, in the bodies of flesh which we have derived from Adam. But we do not war after the flesh; that is, according to the Adamic nature which is connected with our bodies.

In so saying Paul of course referred to himself and his co-workers, and also he stated what normally should be true of every Christian. But is it true of us? Do we recognize the true character of the flesh— that is, of the Adamic nature—and treat it as a condemned thing? It is normal for Christians to walk “after the Spirit” (Gal. 4:29) (Rom. 8:4), but that is not mentioned here, only inferred.

The point here is not exactly our walk, but rather our warfare. Is the believer then called to warfare? He is: and to warfare of a very aggressive sort. His weapons however like the warfare are not fleshly but spiritual.

Every servant of Christ gets involved in warfare. All evangelistic labor has that character, for the Gospel is preached that it may overthrow human pride and bring men to the feet of Christ. All the teaching imparted within the assembly has to overthrow merely human thoughts.

And, evil teaching having invaded the Christian profession there must of necessity be contention for the faith, which partakes of the character of warfare. All warfare however tests us, for it is very easy to slip into the use of purely natural and fleshly weapons. The practiced political speaker, who wants to swing men round to his point of view, has many weapons in his armory—argument, ridicule, graphic exaggeration, and the like. But he contends merely with other human beings, and upon equal terms.

Our warfare is upon another plane altogether. With us there are “strongholds” to be overthrown. Who holds these strongholds? The great adversary himself. He it is who has entrenched himself in human hearts, so that they are filled with “imagination” or “reasonings,” so that they exalt themselves on high against the knowledge of God, and are filled with lawlessness. All these lofty thoughts have to be brought low into captivity to Christ, so that lawlessness is exchanged for obedience to Him. What weapons are sufficient to produce that result?

Merely human weapons must be perfectly futile. Fleshly weapons can no more subdue flesh than Satan can cast out Satan. Spiritual weapons alone can prevail; and they must be used in a way that is according to God, if they are to be effectual.

What spiritual weapons are at our disposal? In this passage the Apostle does not pause to specify, though the succeeding verses seem to show that he was specially thinking of those powers of discipline which were vested in him as an Apostle, powers peculiar to himself. There are however, spiritual weapons which all may use: those for instance, which were mentioned by the Apostles in Jerusalem when they said, “We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4). Every saint can pray, and every saint can in some way speak forth the Word.

The Apostles recognized the extreme value of both these weapons, and refused to allow anything, however good in itself, to divert them from wielding them. Again and again have servants of God found themselves face to face with some human fortress of pride and unbelief like unto Jericho. And yet when encircled by prayers of faith a moment has come when the Word of God has been sounded out as from a ram’s horn, and the walls of unbelief have crashed, the stronghold has been overthrown. The Lord Himself indicated another spiritual weapon when He spoke of a certain kind of demon which only could be cast out by prayer and fasting. Fasting is a weapon but very little used in these days.

Would to God that we all were alive to these things! Take for instance the preaching of the Gospel. Do we recognize that the work involves conflict of this order? If we did we should simply flock to the prayer meetings for the Gospel—that is, if we have any heart for the glory of Christ, any love for the perishing souls of men. As things are, a tiny group of two or three, or perhaps half a dozen, usually turn up for the prayer meeting, and the majority of those who attend the preaching do so in the spirit of those who have come to hear a nice address, which they expect to “enjoy,” as if the enjoyment of saints were the chief end of the Gospel service. If once we caught the spirit that breathes in the verses before us, our prayer meetings, our Gospel meetings, and many other meetings, would speedily be transformed.

The Apostle made a very personal application of these things to the Corinthians. The discipline that he was empowered to exercise was, as we have said, a spiritual weapon, and they might very soon be feeling its sharp edge. The word translated, “destruction” in verse 8, is the same as that translated “pulling down” in verse 4. The word “overthrowing” is possibly better in both places. There is the power of God to overthrow strongholds of unbelief, and the same power can, if the sad necessity arises, overthrow carnal and disobedient believers. Yet the normal and proper use of that power is for the edification, or building up of the saints.

The Apostle had authority, given to him of the Lord, and power in keeping with that authority. The Corinthians, not being very spiritual were inclined to concern themselves a good deal with outward appearance (see verse 1, margin). Paul might be mean to look at, but let them remember that he was Christ’s, and that at least as much as those who were his opponents and detractors, and he had an authority which they had not. Let them know too that when present amongst them they would find him to be just what his letters evidently were—weighty and powerful. Here we have, thrown in by the way, a tribute to the effect that his inspired writings had upon the people of his own day. They were the Word of God, and they authenticated themselves to be such in the hearts of those who had any spiritual sensibilities. They do just the same today. We recognize them as far too weighty and powerful to be the mere word of man.

In speaking thus of his authority Paul was not for one moment entering into a kind of competition with those who opposed him. They were anxious to commend themselves, and so get a footing with the Corinthians; and in doing this a spirit of competition got among them, and they began “measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves,” (ch. 10:12) which was a very unwise proceeding. In so doing they got no higher than themselves. It was all self. One man might be distinguished by this feature, another by that; but in comparing themselves with one another they never rose up to God, and to the measure which He had ordained.

In verse 13 Paul continues to use the word, “measure,” but with a rather different significance, coupling it with the word “rule” which occurs again in verse 15, and also in verse 16, where it is translated “line.” It almost looks as if he were alluding to God’s work in creation, as stated in Job 38:5, where God Himself asks, of the earth, “Who laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?” (Job 38:5). He is a God who works by measure and by line, whether in creation or in the administration connected with His grace. Now God had measured things out and appointed a line or rule in connection with Paul’s apostolic service.

From other scriptures we know what the measure and rule of Paul’s service was. He could say, “I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle... a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity” (1 Tim. 2:7). The line allotted to him was a very extensive one. The whole Gentile world was within the circumference of his measure. Of course then he had not stretched beyond his measure in coming to the Corinthians; his measure reached even to them. They came well within the scope of his apostolic commission.

Indeed, Paul’s eye of evangelistic zeal looked beyond Corinth to more distant regions beyond them, where he expected yet more abundantly to preach the Gospel. In the epistle to the Romans he speaks of having fully preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum, the district we now know as Albania, on the shores of the Adriatic; and ultimately he went to Rome. The true evangelist always has his eye on “the regions beyond” (ch. 10:16).

We must not fail to notice the short clause in verse 15, “when your faith is increased” (ch. 10:15). There was a connection between the increasing of their faith and the enlargement of Paul’s own service, at all events as regards the geographical spread of it. As long as they were feeble in faith their whole state would be feeble, and this would have its effect upon Paul’s activities and service. When he saw them

strong in faith he would be the more free to push on from them into the regions beyond. In this way the state of the saints affects the activities of the servant of God. We are members one of another, and not even an apostle can be wholly unaffected by the state of others. This fully applies to us today, of course. God help us each to diligently and conscientiously inquire as in His presence whether we are helping to enlarge or to contract the work of His servants. One or the other it must be.

Several of the remarks which the Apostle makes in these verses were intended to point out that the men opposing him, and endeavoring to turn the Corinthians from him, were working on very different lines. They were boasting of things without their measure. They held no commission from the risen Lord, as he did. They were not pushing out into the regions beyond, and suffering the privations and persecutions that were involved in such labor. They were "boasting... of other men's labors" (ch. 10:15) for they were meddling with his work; or as he puts it in verse 16, "boasting in another man's line of things made ready" to their hands.

It is very noticeable how false religious cults often have this feature strongly marking them. They find their happy hunting ground amongst other people's converts. They boast in that which after all is the work of others.

The boasting of the Apostle was not in man, nor even in work. As in the first epistle, so here he declares, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (ch. 10:17). If the Lord gives the measure and the rule it is well. If the Lord prospers the work so that men are brought to faith in Christ, and in due course their faith is increased, again it is well. But even so our only boasting must be in the Lord, whose servants we are.

And, on the other hand, the commendation which comes from the Lord is the only commendation worth having. Men may push themselves forward, and commend themselves, as Paul's opponents were doing, but it is all worthless. It is very natural for us to "receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only" (John 5:44), but it is very fatal. To have the Lord's commendation when the great day of the judgment seat arrives, is worth everything. Let us live our lives as those who have their eyes upon that day.

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