2 Corinthians 10:12-11:15

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[0:00] My name is Lachlan. I'm one of the ministry apprentices here, if we haven't met.! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 10.! We've recently begun this new section where 10 verse 1, Paul says, I, Paul, myself, entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.

And he goes on to begin defending his ministry. And we're going to be picking up from verse 12 today. 2 Corinthians 10 verse 12.
Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.
But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. For we are not overextending ourselves as though we did not reach you.
For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence.
[1:22] Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness.

Do bear with me, for I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ.
For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.
Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge. Indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.
Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preach God's gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.
[2:35] And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.

As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you?
God knows I do. And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do.
For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.
So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. This is the word of the Lord.
[3:35] Now, I remember when I started physics in high school. Now, one of the very first things that they taught us and we learned was about measurements and SI units, standard international units.

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The SI units are the, like, agreed-upon units that everyone will use to measure things, which becomes particularly important if you're dealing with countries or companies collaborating that don't usually use the same units.
A famous example of this, some of you may remember, I was alive, but I was one year old, so I don't remember it, but 1999, the NASA Mars Climate Orbiter.
It was a $125 million probe designed to orbit Mars and measure the climate in preparation for an upcoming mission. Except that during the design and build phase, Lockheed Martin used the Imperial system for acceleration data, while NASA JPL used the metric system and didn't make any conversions.
And so the result was an orbit of 57 kilometers instead of the planned 150 kilometers, and the probe burnt up in Mars' atmosphere. Expensive mistake.
[4:53] So getting measurements right is super important in engineering, but in life in general, isn't it? When we measure things, we need something to compare to.

When we talk about meters, what is a meter? For a long time, it was just a physical stick stored in a vault in France. That was the meter, and everything else was based off that.
Now, apparently, it's the distance light travels in a vacuum in one over the speed of light seconds. Anyway. But the point is, we need some kind of benchmark, don't we?
Some ultimate basis to compare and calibrate our measurements to. And today's passage is all about comparisons. Paul is comparing himself to the super apostles.
Now, you might be wondering why he starts by saying, not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.
[5:59] But then he goes on to compare himself to them. Now, maybe he's being a bit sarcastic in that first comment. Not that we dare compare ourselves to these super apostles who are clearly better than us.

He's also, I think, calling out their benchmark. When they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.
Because really, it is what the Lord Jesus says about them that matters. Not their performance or appearance compared to other gospel workers. They have been making much of themselves by calling out Paul as being weak and pathetic.
He is suffering and poor. How can he be a great preacher? His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account. So, Paul sets out to defend himself.
Not simply by saying he's better than these super apostles, but he does do that. But he's changing the benchmark. He's recalibrating and calling the Corinthians to remember what authentic gospel ministry is.
[7:09] It's not the one who commends himself that is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. Jesus has to be our benchmark. What greater authority or one to compare against is there than him?

So, rather than comparing a meter to a ruler to another meter, Paul is going back to the ultimate authority.
The true judge of all things and from him is receiving his commendation. And Paul has been boasting of his authority if you glance back in verse 8 of chapter 10.
He says, For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. Now, he's not for one minute conceding that he has been boasting too much or is out of line, but that even if he were, he wouldn't be ashamed.
And he goes on now in verse 13 to defend his boasting. And in fact, that he hasn't been boasting beyond limits in the work of others, but only in what the Lord Jesus has allotted to him.
[8:15] He was the first to bring the gospel to the Corinthians. His boasting in them is not at the expense of others in any way. And he's picking up on that warfare analogy again, isn't he, that we saw last week.

And he argued that he doesn't fight according to the flesh, that his weapons are of divine power to destroy strongholds, destroy arguments, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.
He isn't boasting in a conquest that has not been his own or in a territory that he hasn't reached, but that through him, the truth of the gospel has reached the Corinthians.

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And they have been won for Christ. And notice how Paul intends to continue this conquest, not by boastful arrogance, coming in and claiming another's work as his own.
No, he says, we do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others, but our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence.
[9:28] As the influence, as the increase in putting their faith in Jesus, it will lead to them trusting in Paul and his co-workers more, right? And just as this whole letter has been about, Paul is calling them back into partnership with him.

And as Paul's influence among them increases, well, they will partner together more and more to reach even more people with the gospel. And that is the nature of gospel ministry, isn't it?
Of gospel partnership. That we reach lands beyond our own. I mean, just think of those being won for Christ at UNSW. Or in North Brisbane. Or Plainland.
Or in Eurasia. Or Austria. Or the Philippines. Or Vanuatu. By partnering together in the gospel, we can reach lands far beyond our own.
And this is how Paul intends to do his ministry. Not by coming in where someone else has preached, turning those people against the one who brought them the gospel, and then boasting in them as his own labor.
[10:36] That's what the super apostles are doing. Now, Paul is boasting in the work that Jesus has done in the Corinthians. Through the powerful word of the gospel. Through Paul's own cross-shaped, weak ministry.

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches. But let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.
The super apostles are commending themselves. But it is not they who are approved. But the one whom the Lord commends who is approved. And are not the Corinthians Paul's letter of recommendation?
Paul begs the Corinthians to bear with him in a little foolishness. And the foolishness Paul is speaking of here is his boasting.
Which he picks up a bit more in the next section and even more next week. This is the line he's walking in this passage, isn't it? Not giving in to worldly, fleshly way of judging himself against others.
[11:43] Classifying and comparing according to the boasts of others and the performance, the appearance, the strength of others. Comparing measuring tapes to rulers as it were. But also participating in a little foolishness to defend himself in his ministry.

And indeed the gospel. Because Paul was the one who brought the gospel to the Corinthians. And so an attack on him really is an attack on the gospel. The super apostles are cunning.
They aren't outright attacking the message of the gospel. They are undermining Paul, casting doubt on his credibility and meanwhile preaching a different gospel.
And Paul, in his earnestness, uses this analogy of betrothal. He says he feels a divine, godly jealousy for the Corinthians. Just as God is a jealous God for his people and burns with jealousy and wrath when his people betray him and run after other gods, so Paul feels a divine jealousy as the matchmaker.
He introduced the Corinthians to Jesus. He set them up as it were by delivering the gospel to them. He wants them to be wholly committed to Jesus. And betrothal is a much stronger contract here than engagement, our idea of engagement.
[13:06] Betrothal is essentially marriage. marriage. The two have made legally binding promises and commitments to each other, but they're not yet living together and they haven't yet consummated the marriage with sex.

So breaking a betrothal was a divorce. Just think about Mary and Joseph in the Christmas story. Mary is found pregnant, she is betrothed to Joseph and Joseph seeks to divorce her.
So breaking a betrothal is a divorce. So it's much more than just our modern idea of engagement. Betrothal is a sincere commitment. And so to flirt with other men during the betrothal is a massive betrayal.
It's unfaithful. Paul is jealous for the Corinthians because rather than remaining wholeheartedly devoted to Christ, they are flirting with the super apostles who are proclaiming a different Jesus, a different spirit, a different gospel.

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And Paul's accusation is that the Corinthians put up with it. They go along with it. And this is a danger for us too, isn't it? The super apostles are cunning, like the serpent in the garden who deceived Eve.
[14:21] They are proclaiming a Jesus, a spirit, and a gospel, and they are outwardly very impressive. But they are not proclaiming the Jesus, the spirit, and the gospel of the Bible.

And their ministry certainly isn't cross-shaped. So do we put up with this kind of thing? I don't think we particularly do in our congregation.
But let us not use that as an excuse to lower our guard. Because there are many false teachers out there. And there are many lies that beg to be heard as truth.
In many so-called churches around our world, or our country, even in our suburb, a different Jesus is being preached this morning.
Some are more obvious than others, and I think of the prosperity gospel, or the gospel of social justice, or the gospel of love overall. These have an appearance of truth and have much truth in them.
[15:28] They claim to proclaim Jesus Christ, but they depart from what he taught in many and various ways. The prosperity gospel, for instance, says that you can enjoy all the riches and abundance and success of eternal life now, here in this world.

They make it all about material gain. Jesus says that all of that is coming in the new creation, and there are good gifts to be enjoyed here and now, too. But the Christian life now is marked by suffering.
If they hated me, they will also hate you. The prosperity gospel says if you're suffering, you must lack faith, or you must have sinned.
It causes people to rely on themselves, on their faith, on how much faith they have, on their good works, and it measures their success by material wealth and physical health.
It looks far different from following a crucified king. or the love over all gospel, which is just my name for it, builds on the truth that God is love, but then it uses that to cheapen his grace, to reject his word and his way.
[16:40] So friends, let's be on guard and not put up with these false doctrines. And here we come to the part of the letter where Paul reveals who he is talking about.

And he hasn't said who they are so far in the letter. But now he calls them the super apostles. The term, of course, dripping with sarcasm.
They think they're so good. They're more apostler than Paul. They're the apostolist apostles.
Because of Paul's apparent weakness, his suffering, his jar of clay like ministry, his cross-shaped ministry, they think they're better.
They've been telling the Corinthians as much. Paul says, no, these are great preachers, boasting in their own strength, but is their strength greater than God's?
God, who in his sovereignty has chosen to empower cross-shaped ministry, jar of clay ministry, Paul's speech is of no account, they say.
[17:46] And here the objection Paul is answering seems to be his preaching for no cost. He can't even make a living off his preaching. He has to rely on others or go and build tents to support himself.

How pathetic, why listen to anything he says? And the implication, of course, is that the super-apostles are charging the Corinthians for the privilege of hearing them speak. But Paul, on the other hand, engaging in some foolishness, defends himself.
He preached the gospel to them free of charge, off the support of other churches. He never burdened them and to exalt them. And all of this is to exalt them and because of his love for them.
While the super-apostles exalt themselves, Paul humbles himself for the Corinthians. As the apostle of the suffering servant, Jesus, Paul suffers for the sake of others.
this is not a discrediting weakness, as the super-apostles would like to claim, but rather it is the power of God, the treasure of the gospel in Paul, the jar of clay, so that the surpassing power belongs to God.
[19:05] Hold up the super-apostles and Paul next to each other and one clearly looks more impressive than the other, more successful, more grand, more glorious, but hold up both to the cross, to the king who humbled himself to death, and one is clearly authentic and the other empty.

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So then in this last section, Paul really pulls back the curtain and unmasks these super-apostles and he's been building a picture of them throughout the letter, hasn't he?
Maybe you remember, he's really been comparing himself to them the whole time in the light of the cross of authentic gospel ministry and he's been building this case against them.
The super-apostles are peddlers of God's word. They need letters of recommendation. They practice underhanded and disgraceful ways. They boast in their outward appearance.
They are unbelievers. And here he goes all the way. They are servants of Satan. their ministry is serpent shaped rather than servant shaped.
[20:16] Disguising themselves as apostles of Christ, as servants of righteousness, they are actually sent by the devil. They claim that they work on the same terms as Paul, but by this point in the letter surely we can see that that is a lie.

And Paul is determined to undermine their claim through his preaching and boasting in the Lord. not only are they wrong, not only are they damaging Paul's relationship with the Corinthians, not only are they preaching a different Jesus, a different spirit and a different gospel, they are doing all of that in the service of Satan.
And his method is lies, disguising his lies in the truth, masquerading as caring about the vulnerable, loving others, loving truth, but under the wall is a ravenous wolf looking for someone to devour.
And the best lies have an element of truth, don't they? They are as close to the truth as possible, but where they are contrary is where they are deadly. So let us not be deceived.
Let us have our wits about us as we live in this world. Don't be naive to Satan's designs. Be on guard, because often his schemes are not as we'd expect.
[21:36] Now, we've just had Halloween, and many Christians, I think rightly, are on guard about Halloween. But have you considered how Satan uses Christmas? How the truth disguised lies, right?

Elevating getting stuff over generosity, elevating food and even family over Jesus, the king, who it's all about. And until now, it's rare to find any mention of Jesus outside of the church at Christmastime.
The best lies are disguised in truth. But let us not be deceived like Eve. Let us be aware of the lie that God doesn't want the best for us.
He is holding us back. And how do we guard against that? With the truth of the gospel. That Jesus, the only son of God, gave his life so that you could be in his kingdom.
Cling to that truth. Follow the king. It's time to wrap up. And to think about how we measure successful gospel ministry. Do we let appearances cloud our judgment?
[22:50] I mean, wouldn't it be great to have our own building filled with 10,000 people with hundreds becoming Christians every day? To be well thought of in our suburb, to be praised by all.

And I'm not saying that any of those things are particularly wrong in and of themselves. We should have an earnest desire to see these 50,000 people in our suburb saved for Christ.
But relying on our strength, our eloquent words, our good appearances to do all of that would be to miss the point. God in his sovereignty has chosen to empower a cross-shaped jar of clay ministry. ministry. So let's not measure ourselves by comparing to one another our ministry compared to their ministry, our conversions compared to theirs. If we do that, then we are without understanding.
The benchmark of all authentic gospel ministry is the one who is leading it, our Lord Jesus. His commendation is all that matters. Not the world's, not even each other's, but his.
[23:56] And let us be on guard when we are tempted like the Corinthians, lest we put up with another Jesus or another spirit or another gospel, as so many churches in our own country and suburbs are doing, making the gospel sound more palatable to get people in the door.

No, let us hold fast to the one true gospel, to Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us measure our gospel ministry against his gospel and not put up with or give in to the lies of Satan and his servants.
Let us hold fast to Christ, our betrothed, longing for and hastening the day when we will be joined with him in marriage. Let's pray. loving Father, thank you for the Lord Jesus.
Thank you that he humbled himself to the point of death on the cross. Thank you for Paul and for his ministry that has expanded even to reach us.
I pray that you would help us to be on guard against these lies of Satan that are so prevalent in our world, to hold all things up to the light of your gospel.
[25:16] Amen.

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