



Holding Fast to the Gospel of Jesus

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God empowers His people to share the one true gospel of Jesus Christ and confront anyone who preaches a false gospel.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: 2 Corinthians 11:1–12:13

Swimming with sharks, disturbing beehives, challenging gorillas, poking sleeping bears, hunting crocodiles with your bare hands—most people would call these foolish choices. Depending on the context, there could be some validity to each of these activities for trained zoologists and researchers, but by and large, people dismiss each of these as a fool’s errand. The danger and certain pain outweigh any conceivable benefit. But that doesn’t stop people from fantasizing about interactions with exotic animals, nor does it prohibit everyone from participating in such activities, whether to their joy or their peril.



What animal would you count it most foolish to seek out and encounter?

Date of My Bible Study: _____

Group Time

Point 1: Hold fast to the one true gospel (2 Cor. 11:1-4).

¹ I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ 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.

Having been instrumental in the gospel coming to Corinth, the conversions among the Jews and the Gentiles, and the founding of the church there, Paul saw himself as a spiritual father to the Corinthian church. He labored hard to provide for his own physical needs while at the same time providing for the spiritual needs of this fledgling congregation. His commitment and goal was to “give the bride away” to her betrothed husband—Jesus Christ. To that end, he sought her purity in the *faith* and in their *fellowship*.

Bride of Christ: The church is described as the bride of Christ, faithfully _____ for the day when Christ will return and heaven and earth will be one. Made up of all believers from all _____ and _____, the church is the bride that Christ _____.

Within the fellowship of the church in Corinth, some believers had tolerated and even welcomed boastful teachers of a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel—in other words, a different faith that could not save. And listening to these voices, the Corinthians had begun to belittle Paul’s voice. But jealous on God’s behalf for these fellow believers, Paul chose to fight this uphill battle and get a little muddy in the process. To counter the fools threatening his children in the faith, he too would engage in some “foolishness,” namely, doing some boasting of his own as an apostle of the one true gospel.



What are some “other gospels” people proclaim?

Point 2: Rely on God's power to share the gospel (2 Cor. 11:5-11).

⁵ Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. ⁶ 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.

⁷ Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. ¹¹ And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

The culture of Corinth expected two things from her teachers: *First*, they wanted their teachers to be eloquent, trained public speakers, which Paul's opponents—the "super-apostles"—were. Paul could hold his own in a public forum (Acts 17:19-34), but a professional public speaker he was not. That did not keep Paul from fulfilling his calling, however, or give him an inferiority complex. In fact, he boasted in this because God's power could shine brightly through his shortcoming. Plus, while he lacked the desired training, he was more than adequate in his knowledge of the gospel message, which he heard firsthand from Jesus Himself (Gal. 1:11-12).



Which do you think is more prized in our culture: eloquence or knowledge? Why?

The Corinthians' *second* expectation was that their teachers make their sole living through the practice of their teaching. If you were a good teacher, you were worthy of being supported by those who would learn from you. Paul himself recognized the validity of this arrangement, but he also claimed the right to forego such support (1 Cor. 9). His pattern of ministry was primarily self-supporting, not because he was unworthy of support but because he did not want to burden the people he ministered to, so he worked. He preached the gospel of Jesus for free out of love, and he trusted the Lord to provide for all his needs, which the Lord always does (Acts 18:5; Phil 4:19).

Point 3: Confront those who preach a false gospel (2 Cor. 11:12-15).

¹² 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. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

Up to this point, Paul has been sarcastic in his comments about the “super-apostles.” Their boasting and the gullibility of some Corinthian believers forced Paul to try to commend himself to them as an apostle, even though God’s commendation is the only one that matters (2 Cor. 10:18). But here, Paul gets to the point—these “super-apostles” were minions of Satan! They looked grand, sounded wise, and fit the Corinthians’ mold, but they lied, deceived, and destroyed, just like their master, Satan (John 10:10). As the saying goes, not all that glitters is gold. The church must examine her leaders; skills have their place, but knowledge of and commitment to the gospel are of utmost importance.

 What are some ways we can recognize false teachers in the church?

Paul’s last shot in this passage was a warning of the future for the “super-apostles” and presumably those who would follow them. These enemies of the truth sought to deceive people and distract them from the Christ, the one true Person whose perfect righteousness could save them. Through their false gospel, they would condemn people to hell, the place prepared for Satan and his demons (Matt. 25:41). Likewise, they too would face the fiery judgment of God’s wrath for those who resist and oppose the kingdom of His Son, unless they repented.

 Why must believers confront those who would preach a false gospel in the church?



Voices from Church History

“Evil apes respectability, and tares do their best to look like wheat, but however close a similarity to wheat they have in appearance their taste completely undeceives the discerning ... We therefore need the grace of God, a sober mind and watchful eyes, so as not to eat tares for wheat and come to harm for not knowing better; so as not to mistake the wolf for a sheep and be ravaged; and so as not to take the death-dealing devil for a good angel and be devoured.”¹

—Cyril of Jerusalem
(c. 313-386)

Daily Study

Day 1: Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-4

Paul loved the Corinthian church. He had invested a year and a half in Corinth to preach and teach them the gospel. He labored like a father to provide for their spiritual needs so they would grow in faith and godliness. But then they turned on him. They chose to listen to some smooth-talkers who led them down muddy paths.

Paul, however, always sought the purity of the church in Corinth. He considered it his duty *to present her as a clean, holy bride for Christ*. How did he pursue that goal? Through preaching and teaching the Word of God and pointing people to Jesus.

In Ephesians 5, Paul taught on the relationship and analogy of husbands and wives, which corresponds to the relationship between Christ and His church. In verses 25-27, Paul says that Jesus gave Himself to save His bride from sin, cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word—*to present the church to Himself as a pure bride*.

Paul saw himself as a spiritual father to the Corinthian believers, but he also knew he was a vessel through whom the Lord accomplished His mission to purify His church. May we be mindful of the same—we work hard in faith knowing the Lord is working through us.

 How will you prioritize the Word of God in your life for your purity and that of your church?

Voices from the Church

“Jesus Christ is not merely a model for our view of the Bible or its interpretation. He is the main theme and goal of our study of Scripture. The focus is on Jesus ... Our study of the Bible begins from our belief in Christ and concludes with the building of our faith. Indeed, in all our theological pursuits Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the author and finisher of our faith.”³

—David Dockery

Day 2: Read 2 Corinthians 11:5-11

Growing up, I lived across the street from my grandparents. Occasionally my mother and grandmother would pick things up from the store at the other's request. Then came the time for settling up. I recall one occasion when Mom handed me some money to take to Grandmother. When I showed it to Grandmother, she told me to take it back to Mom, who sent me back with it once more. The second time, Grandmother told me to keep it. I liked taking money to Grandmother to settle my mom's debts.

My mom was a little frustrated with the situation, but she never doubted her mom's love, which was evident in Grandmother's refusal to take the money in the first place. The Corinthians, on the other hand, were led to misinterpret Paul's refusal to take payment for his ministry. But what they viewed as a contractual obligation was actually the action of a loving father to care for his children in the faith.



What are some ways you can sacrifice out of love for others?

Day 3: Read 2 Corinthians 11:12-15

Paul made the personal choice to refuse pay for his ministry. As long as he preached the gospel in a city, it seems he denied their monetary support, deciding instead to support himself with his skill in tent making (Acts 18:1-4; 20:34; 1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:9). But he would receive support from churches in different cities. In particular, Paul praised the Philippian church for their support and being the means by which the Lord met Paul's needs, leading to the praise of God (Phil. 4:10-20).

In refusing pay, Paul was refusing to be a burden to the churches he was planting. He wanted no hindrance to the gospel being heard from those who might see him as a charlatan, like the "super-apostles." He also wanted no limitations on his proclamation of the gospel, which some might expect if they funded his work. Instead of taking pay, he chose to set a sacrificial example, just as Jesus did.



How will you support those who are called to proclaim the gospel, both in your church and throughout the world?

Day 4: Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

The “super-apostles” boasted in their heritage as Jews. They boasted in their education, training, and skill as public speakers. They expected pay for their “ministry.” And they lorded their authority over the Corinthians being arrogant and opportunistic.

Paul, on the other hand, shared their heritage, but he called it foolish to boast in it. He was an authority through his knowledge of the gospel, but he let his preaching and its results speak for themselves. Finally, whereas the “super-apostles” boasted in their lofty position, Paul boasted in his weaknesses and sufferings. In his weaknesses, the Lord’s strength shone through. In his sufferings, he followed in the steps of his Savior, who suffered greatly on the cross for our salvation.

Which one sounds more like Christ? The goal of discipleship is to become like the teacher. Those who follow Jesus must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23). The call to follow Jesus is a call to suffering.



How are you suffering for the sake of Christ?

Day 5: Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-13

Having boasted about weaknesses and sufferings, even fleeing from a threat against his life (2 Cor. 11:32-33), Paul subtly boasted about a profound vision or experience from the Lord and other revelations, the kind of experiences that makes one boast for real. To temper the human inclination toward pride, the Lord allowed a messenger of Satan to torment Paul. This could have been a specific temptation, a physical ailment, or possibly the enemies of the faith that kept cropping up to frustrate his ministry. Either way, Paul took the matter to the God who is sovereign over all things, even the dealings of messengers of Satan. Paul concluded that his ministry would thrive better if this thorn were removed. God, of course, knew better.

This metaphorical thorn was painful yet purposeful, not unlike Jesus’ crucifixion. Paul prayed for the thorn to be removed; Jesus prayed for the cup of God’s wrath to pass from Him (Luke 22:42). In both cases, God had different plans. Jesus went to the cross, where He died so that we may live, and Paul proclaimed the sufficiency of God’s grace to overcome and shine through our weaknesses.



How might your weaknesses serve as a platform for the praise of God’s power and grace in Christ?

