

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Lesson 11: Paul and the False Apostles -- 2 Corinthians 11:1–33

A father who has given his daughter in marriage feels a fierce protectiveness when someone comes around trying to lure her away. Paul feels exactly that about the Corinthians. “I feel a divine jealousy for you,” he writes, “since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.” The church is the bride of Christ, promised to one Husband, and Paul has appointed himself the guardian of that engagement. So when smooth-talking outsiders show up to seduce the church with a different message, Paul does not stay calm and detached. He burns. And his fear is specific: “as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

That phrase, “a sincere and pure devotion to Christ,” is the treasure this whole chapter is fighting to protect. The danger in Corinth was not that the church would suddenly renounce Jesus. The danger was subtler and far more common: that they would drift, by small degrees, into a corrupted version of the faith. Paul names the threat with chilling precision. The intruders came preaching “another Jesus than the one we proclaimed,” offering “a different spirit” and “a different gospel.” And the most alarming part is the Corinthians’ response: “you put up with it readily enough.” They were not horrified by the counterfeit. They were entertaining it.

Paul pulls back the curtain on who these teachers really are. They presented themselves as “super-apostles,” impressive, polished, confident, everything Paul’s critics said he was not. But Paul calls them what they are: “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.” And then he reveals the power behind the disguise: “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.” This is one of the most important warnings in all of Scripture. Error rarely arrives looking like error. It comes dressed in light, speaking the language of righteousness, wearing the costume of an apostle. Discernment is not optional.

To answer the false apostles, Paul does something almost comical. They boast of their credentials, so Paul, playing the fool, boasts too, but he boasts of all the wrong things. Not his successes, but his sufferings. Imprisonments, beatings, a stoning, three shipwrecks, sleepless nights, hunger, cold, and the daily weight of anxiety for the churches. He even ends with the undignified memory of being lowered out of a window in a basket to escape Damascus. The true servant of Christ, Paul insists, is not marked by impressive self-promotion but by faithful, costly love that pours itself out for others. Read this chapter and learn to guard your sincere and pure devotion to Christ, and to recognize the difference between the true gospel and its many counterfeits.

Group Discussion: Paul warns that false teachers come preaching “another Jesus,” “a different spirit,” and “a different gospel,” and that the Corinthians “put up with it readily enough” (v. 4).

Why are counterfeit versions of the faith often easier to accept than the true gospel, and what makes a church or a believer vulnerable to being “led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ”? How can we tell a counterfeit from the real thing?

Personal Reflection: Paul longs to present the church “as a pure virgin to Christ,” with “a sincere and pure devotion” to Him (vv. 2–3). Where has your own devotion to Christ become divided, diluted, or distracted, crowded out by other loyalties, comforts, or competing voices? What would it take to recover a more single-hearted devotion to Him?

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–33

Study Questions

1. Paul says he betrothed the Corinthians “to one husband,” to present them “as a pure virgin to Christ,” and fears their being led astray “from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (vv. 2–3). What does this teach about the church’s relationship to Christ and about the kind of wholehearted devotion He desires from His people?
2. Where has your devotion to Christ become divided or diluted, shared with other loves, loyalties, or distractions that compete for the place He alone should hold? What is one specific rival you need to dethrone to recover a single-hearted devotion?
3. Paul warns about those who come preaching “another Jesus,” “a different spirit,” and “a different gospel,” which the Corinthians “put up with readily enough” (v. 4). What does this teach about the existence of counterfeit gospels, and why is a church’s easy tolerance of a distorted message so dangerous?
4. Are there subtly distorted versions of the faith you have found yourself drawn to or willing to tolerate, a Jesus who only affirms, a gospel without the cross or repentance, a spirituality that asks nothing of you? Where have you been too willing to “put up with it”?
5. Paul refused to be a financial burden, preaching the gospel “free of charge,” in pointed contrast to teachers who exploited the church (vv. 7–12). What does this teach about the integrity and selflessness that should mark a true servant of Christ, as opposed to those who use ministry for personal gain?
6. Examine your own motives in serving God and others. Where might self-interest, the desire for recognition, advantage, or reward, be quietly mixed in with your service? What would it look like to serve with the selfless integrity Paul models?
7. To answer the boastful false apostles, Paul boasts only of his sufferings for Christ, imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, and the daily anxiety for the churches (vv. 23–29). What does it teach that Paul measures genuine ministry by costly, faithful love and suffering rather than by impressive credentials or success?
8. What do you tend to consider worth boasting in or being impressed by, in yourself and others? How would your values change if, like Paul, you measured a life by its faithful, costly love for Christ and others rather than by visible success?
9. Paul unmasks the false apostles as “deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ,” and warns that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light,” his servants

appearing as “servants of righteousness” (vv. 13–15). What does this teach about how spiritual deception actually works, why we must test every teaching against the apostolic gospel of Scripture rather than judging by appearances or claims, and what this means for guarding against false teachers, new revelations, and counterfeit gospels today?

10. Look back across the whole chapter, the jealous love for Christ’s bride, the counterfeit gospels, the disguised deceiver, the boast in weakness and suffering. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 1:6–9, no other gospel, and a curse on any who preach a different one; Acts 17:11, the Bereans who examined the Scriptures to test what they were taught; 1 John 4:1, testing the spirits to see whether they are from God; Matthew 7:15–20, false prophets known by their fruits; 2 Timothy 3:16–17, all Scripture breathed out by God and sufficient to equip us