

2 Corinthians 11:1-12:13

The climax of the letter: two patterns of leadership

There are a lot of reasons why we might want to talk about abusive leadership.¹

But the best reason is that we're going through the Bible and we find that God talks about abusive leadership. We've got to be careful we aren't reading into the Bible our contemporary concerns – we've got to be careful we're not skewing things by what we're especially sensitive to – but what if God could be sensitising us to stuff that is actually there in the Bible we just hadn't seen it so clearly before?

God is very concerned about our '**patterns of ministry**' our '**patterns of leadership**' – that's what this couple of chapters is all about and it's really what the whole letter of 2 Corinthians is all about. It's all been building to this climax.

11v1: I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me!

The whole letter of 2 Corinthians has been full of emotion – but here he's about to go into overdrive – he's saying, I'm just about to take off the safety catch and give you everything I've got – irony, sarcasm, extreme language, drama – he's willing to play the fool.

Foolishness is the theme through this section – you can see that from a glance at the outline (on the handout) – and it's foolishness in the sense of talking about himself. He doesn't want to do that – he wants to preach 'not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord' (2 Cor. 4:5) but he's got to talk about himself. And the first thing he tells them about himself is his great fear:

1. The great fear: Seduced from Christ (11:1-4)

² I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³ But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Such important verses.

Christ is the husband. The bridegroom to whom the church is betrothed. This is such an important category. He took flesh that he could be the husband. He died to win us for himself. He is in heaven now longing for his church, desiring the day of the wedding banquet. Christ is the bridegroom.

And the church is the bride, promised to Christ. The whole point of Creation is that there would be a bride for the Son, who would bring glory to the Son by enjoying and loving the Son – by having a sincere and pure devotion to the Son.

And Paul is the friend of the bridegroom – like John the Baptist – the best man. His task is to bring people to Christ, to 'betroth them to Christ'. All his labour, all his ministry is directed towards seeing their love for Christ kindled and inflamed and increased. He is jealous for that – with great intensity. And so his great fear is v8:

that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray [literally: seduced] from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

¹ There are reports coming out all the time. Maybe we or people we know have been badly affected. We're worried about the impact on evangelism. We're worried about the impact on how we disciple people and church discipline. We're worried that we could end up being the abusive leader and we don't want a 31:8 report on us one day down the line.

At few questions for us straight away:

- Is this how we see gospel ministry – Christ the husband, the church the bride – and our job – as Richard Sibbes put it: to "Woo for Christ"? To preach in a way that paints the loveliness of Christ. Is that the centre of our ministry? It won't be all we're doing – if you're the best man at the wedding you've got to organise the ushers and check the flowers and the drinks – but is the heart of our ministry bigging up the bridegroom, getting the church to focus on him?
- Is the goal that we're striving for sincere and pure devotion – not just that the church can understand the Bible, not even just that the church can teach the Bible to others, but that the church would be devoted to Christ? The understanding and teaching others are massively important – but its love for Christ that changes people and love for Christ that glorifies him. Is that our goal? And perhaps a test of that:
- What is your great fear for your church? What makes the red light flash on your pastoral dashboard? What makes the alarms go off? What makes you think we really need to address that urgently? Impending divorce. Sudden job loss or bereavement or serious accident. A safeguarding issue. Drug abuse. Non-attendance by what was a core family. Fine. But what about if there are families in the church who are doing well physically, financially, marriage-wise, attending regularly, but they're being seduced from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ? For Paul – that's his great fear.

But how exactly are they being led astray? He flags up in verse 4 – this is a deadly serious gospel issue – but we'll come back to that in a bit.

Next point – he explains his pattern of ministry that the Corinthians were despising.

2. The despised pattern: Servant leadership (11:5-15)

⁵ I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles."

He's setting up a really clear contrast between himself and those who he says are clearly 'super-apostles'!! On a higher plane. Supersonic men of God. Field marshals on the Lord's battle field.

⁶ I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

The first way he's unlike the super-apostles is in his teaching. They were all style but no substance. Paul is about substance and straight-forwardness.²

The second way he's unlike the super-apostles is in his funding model. And this seems to be a really big thing because it comes up repeatedly.

⁷ Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. ¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. ¹¹ Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

² Straightforwardness in language and life.

The Corinthians had this model where you get what you pay for. If someone's good – we pay them. If it's free it's probably rubbish.

But Paul uses the most dramatic language he can reach for to say – was that a Sin!! Do you think I don't love you? It's because I love you! – I stole from other churches for you!

- That's a dramatic way of talking about fundraising and partnership development!

But the thing I want us to really notice is verse 7 – the middle of that verse is Paul's philosophy of ministry: ⁷Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?

Lower myself to elevate you. Which sounds like Jesus: *though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty he might enrich you.*

That is servant leadership:

⁸I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.

There was sacrifice on the part of the Macedonians and there was sacrifice on Paul's part. It's hard raising support for gospel ministry. It's humbling work. And that was in addition to his tent making. But he knew that particularly in an *evangelistic context* where he didn't want people to think they had to pay for the gospel, and particularly in a *cultural context* of paid orators and worship of power and money and wisdom – he needed to demonstrate a completely different way.

The point for us here is not the precise funding model – it's the ministry philosophy – loving, serving, lowering yourself to lift others up.

That is a Christ-like pattern and it provides a stark contrast to the false apostles:

¹² And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. ¹³ For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

Notice – once again a parallel between the activity of Satan and the activity of the false apostles. Eve was seduced by the serpent from a sincere devotion to Christ and the false apostles, like the serpent, pretend to be on your side – they don't look like Darth Vader, they look like good church leaders, they have the appearance of godliness but it's a masquerade – they are actually leading the church away from Christ.

But how exactly are they doing that?

We've already got a clue that they're probably not teaching like Paul or doing their funding like Paul but the next section gets into what is their pattern of leadership.

Third point.

3. The dominant pattern: Power leadership (11:16-21)

¹⁶ I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. ¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

This is abusive leadership isn't it?

V20 – enslaves, exploits, takes advantage, puts on airs – literally: lifts themselves up – so where as Paul lowers himself to exalt them – they lower people to exalt themselves. They even – slap you in the face.

I remember watching a clip someone sent me of a Benny Hinn mass meeting where he got people up on stage and he was literally slapping them and they were falling over – partly through the push and partly through the emotional manipulation.

But I hesitate to mention that example because the danger with those sort of extreme examples is that they play us all onside – cos I'm not that guy! But this is a lot wider than the Benny Hinn's or the names we know who've fallen in the last couple of years.

- a) This is just the normal default setting of the flesh – this is how we all naturally operate outside the Garden of Eden - exploiting, taking advantage, manipulating – lifting ourselves up at other people's expense. All leadership will naturally tend towards this mode, in differing degrees.
- b) Abusive leadership is often disguised – remember these guys are *masquerading* as apostles of Christ – so it's unlikely to be obvious. It'll often be behind closed doors or the exploitation will be done in such a way that even those witnessing it won't be completely sure what's going on.³
- c) This is accepted – that's the shock here – v20: **you even put up with anyone**. Paul is not victim blaming here – the point here is that there is a church culture which is complicit in the patterns of abusive leadership. You get it in the Old Testament too: **“the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way” (Jer. 5:31)**. This is about a church which is happy to turn a blind area to the pride and pushiness and self-promotion of its leaders because they are brilliant preachers or are successfully turning around the church from decline to growth. With the Corinthians it's particularly idolatry of wisdom and power. And the irony is that when you worship those things, you end up submitting to 'wise' 'powerful' people and you become foolish and disempowered.

And the thing that really gets me here is that these leaders were almost certainly orthodox. All the commentators agree on this. There's hardly anything in the letters to the Corinthians to suggest that these super apostles were heretics. They were almost certainly orthodox on the humanity and deity of Christ and the nature of the atonement. That's one of the things that makes it so hard to spot them as false apostles – they preach apostolic doctrine.

The issue is not doctrine it's ministry philosophy, it's leadership patterns.

But the ministry philosophy is a functional heresy. So back to v4 of this chapter:

⁴ For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

Notice the “put up with” – same word as in v19 and v20

So the way I think we're supposed to understand this is that the other Jesus, different Spirit, different gospel are being communicated by their pattern of leadership. As Gary Millar says, it's “their arrogant rejection of the way of the cross” that is theologically poisoning the church.

I find that very striking. You can be an orthodox preacher but a functional heretic in your pattern of leadership – because it doesn't picture the gospel – it's not lowering to lift up.

So Paul says: **²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!**

³ E.g. gaslighting – psychological manipulation so the victim doubts their own understanding of reality.

Massive irony there and it tees up the next section which is all about boasting in weakness.

4. The revolutionary boast: Weakness (11:21b-12:10)

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about.

So this is Paul finally getting into his actual boasting – he’s given us a big build up – now he’s going to go into full-on fool-mode and boast. This is the most powerful sustained rhetoric of the whole letter. And you can see from the outline on the handout there’s loads of form to this which just ratchets the emotional level up and up.

He starts with 4 ways in which he’s a match for the super-apostles – Are they this? So am I. So am I. So am I. I am more.

Then that last – I am more – becomes a drop down menu to 4 ways he is more

But this is where it turns in an unexpected direction – he doesn’t list how he’s preached at more conferences or written more books or planted more churches – he speaks of

Labours more abundant, prisons more abundant, floggings excessively, *deaths* many times!

Then he does a drop down from deaths to unpack that in 6 afflictions, with numbers:

5 lashes, 3 rods, 1 stoning, 3 shipwrecks, 24 hr in the sea, travels many times (see the repeated many times – there’s a poetry and rhythm to this)

Then we drop down to unpack his ‘travels’ – why were those travels so hard

8 dangers he met on the way, in pairs: rivers, bandits (natural dangers and human dangers, Covid and crime); fellow Jews and Gentiles; city and country; sea (obvious danger) false believers (hidden danger)

And the poetry continues:

In labour and toil, in sleeplessness many times

In hunger and thirst, in foodlessness many times

In cold and nakedness

²⁸ Besides everything else, [besides these external things there is the internal pressure] I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

And then two questions that unpack the experience of that daily concerns:

²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? That should be: Who is weak and I am not weak – he shares their weakness – that’s really important.

Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? Paul is jealous for them as the friend of the bridegroom.

So Paul sums up what he’s doing:

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Which is an amazing sentence – we can get overfamiliar with this – but that would make no sense to the people who first read that. How can you boast in weakness – that’s an oxymoron.

Paul is subverting the whole idea of boasting. He’s turning upside down their whole value system which prized power and success and comfort and glory – just like ours does.

He’s going to unpack that further but just to pause and see what the weakness is that he’s already been boasting in through verses 23-29 – this is very helpful to clarify what sort of weakness we’re talking about:

- a) Hard work, labour, toil - v23 at the beginning of the section and v27 near the end. And all the way through there is just loads of activity and he’s constantly on the move. So it’s not a passive, inactive sort of weakness – it’s weakness in sweat and exhaustion.
- b) Persecution – prison, floggings, rods, stoning

- c) Danger – really striking to me – his longest list here is dangers – risks – not necessarily actually affliction but vulnerable, risking natural and human dangers.
- d) Deprivation and humiliation – v27 - sleepless, hungry and thirsty, cold and naked. Like Christ on the cross – sense of sacrifice and of shame – humiliating thing to be stripped and naked.
- e) Pressure of love – v28-29 – tied to the churches in such a way that he shares their weakness and their waywardness hurts him.

That's the sort of weakness Paul is talking about.

And then he gives the witness of God and the witness of a concrete example:

³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

There you've got persecution, danger, humiliation. An unsuccessful mission trip with an undignified, uncomfortably, unsafe exit.

12 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.

And now Paul tells us what he could boast in but refrains from boasting in

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.⁴ ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

I think in J C Ryle's Christian Leaders it talks about one of the 18th century leaders that they were never concerned if people thought too low of them but they were mortified if people thought too highly of them.

Paul could boast in visions and revelation – been to the third heaven – done that – but he hasn't got the T-shirt and he goes out of his way to talk about it in this strange oblique way because he doesn't want to boast in anything except his weaknesses.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

When Paul was talking about the third heaven trip he used third person and he wasn't permitted to tell what God said. But when he starts talking about weakness he is very happy to go into first person and say what God said:

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is

⁴ See the repetition of 11:30.

why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This is the central thesis of the whole letter. This is the secret of Paul's ministry. Ministry out of weakness so that the power of Christ is at work.

We got it in chapter 1 with Paul wanting us to know about his afflictions. We got it in chapter 4 with the jars of clay but here it's even clearer. The Lord God himself says: "My power is made perfect in weakness."

So finally there's the appeal:

5. The appeal: Paradigm shift (12:11-13)

¹¹ I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing. ¹² I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. ¹³ How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Paul is drawing together his argument in this section and driving it home with an ironic, sarcastic even – Forgive me – I've obviously committed a terrible sin against you in serving you for free, I've obviously done you a great wrong by not abusing you.

He's using this really extreme sarcasm because he wants to shock them into seeing how messed up their value system is – to see how messed up it is that they could prefer a pattern of self-exalting, self-promoting leadership rather than a pattern of Christ-like, servant leadership.

And there is the same challenge for us.

- Have we really got our heads round this paradoxical truth that God's power is made perfect in weakness?
- Or are our hearts being seduced at least in part by the gods of success and safety?
- When we look at a leader who's athletic and dynamic and then we look at a leader who's preaching from a wheel chair – who do we think is going to be more powerfully used by God?
- I might say I believe this verse 9. I might even preach it. But do I really 'delight in' weaknesses – do I embrace them – do I see hard work and opposition and danger and pain and pressure as opportunities for Christ to become greater in people's eyes and me to become less in people's eyes.