

Sermon Series – 2 Corinthians 11:19-12:9

Preached on Sexagesima, February 3rd, 2013

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Sexagesima

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalm: Psalm 84

New Testament Reading: 2 Corinthians 11:19-12:9

Gospel Reading: Luke 18:31-43

You must not listen to fools, but guard, protect, and listen only to those who preach Christ from the Word of God.

Paul is writing to the Corinthians for a second time and in our text today he is coming out and making a very bold pastoral statement: Be careful! Paul warns Christians to watch who you let come in and preach to you. We are told to watch who we follow. Paul cautions believers to test what a prophet has to say. He tells believers to be wise. You must be wise as serpents, but innocent as doves. Today's message is a message not only for the church, but also a message for pastors and leaders within the church. It is a message that still resonates nearly 2000 years after it was originally written and it is as bold of a message to us as it was when he wrote it to the Corinthians. Do not listen to fools, but guard, protect, and listen only to those who preach Christ from the Word of God.

Paul loved the believers in Corinth, but they had started to listen to fools. Paul says to his beloved, you are listening to one that enslaves you, exploits you, takes advantage of you, pushes themselves forward on you, and slaps you in the face¹. Would you invite someone like that into your pulpit? I would hope not. Paul is pointing out the obvious to

¹ 2 Corinthians 11:20

the readers. This is an example of what believers should not have in the pulpit. These teachers in Corinth intimidated and terrorized the believers. They should not have a let a man who boasts of himself or claims to be better than the rest of the assembly. However, this is exactly who the Corinthians were calling and following. They were beginning to listen to these false teachers and turn from the true Word. Do you know what the number one problem the schools have today? I have heard it is no longer drug use, but bullying. Bullying seems to be the number one problem. And yet, how many times does a child come home from school and report to their mom or dad that someone is bullying them at school? I do not know if our attitude is that we should just “suck it up”, “be a man”, “do not worry about those things”. We tend to let people walk all over us. How about an example from the other gender? Look at the women’s shelters. How many women come into a battered women’s shelter only to go right back into the same situation either with the same man or a different man? Why is it we let people walk all over us? Paul’s message is bold and appropriate for us. Intimidation in the world and especially from the pulpit is not Christian. We should not let people walk over us. We need to hear God’s Word and that Word consists of the Law, but we must also hear the Gospel message along with the Law. While the Law brings us to our knees, the Gospel must pick us up from the ground. When the Law tells us we are sinners and destined for death, the Gospel must tell us that we are redeemed in Christ and He brings life. There should be no bullying at school and certainly not from the pulpit.

Paul continues in his letter to the Corinthians and he writes in very expressive statements to his Christian brethren. In the text, Paul includes a parenthetical statement

concerning his right to boast above all others. He writes that “I am speaking like a madman”². Paul is making an argument concerning his point above. If anyone has the right to boast and treat people in the manner described, it is Paul. As a pastor, Paul is using a form of argument to bring his brothers and sisters back under Christ. His argument is meant to be taken rhetorically. Paul writes that these false teachers have come into your lives and bully you and boast of their standing with God. However, Paul says, what about my boasting. I am a Hebrew. I am an Israelite. I am from Abraham. Paul claims that his lineage and nationality and piety is right up there with every one of these men. Paul says that he is every bit as equal as these people who are trying to lead you astray. Paul adds, but are these men servants of Christ? Paul used the word servant many times throughout his writings, but in our lesson today, Paul uses a different word for servant. Paul typically talks about being a “slave” to Christ, but today he is talking about being a *diakonos*: a deacon or helper. Paul writes that he has gone out of his way to be a helper for Christ. Paul says that these bullies in the church may have all of the above traits mentioned, but so do I and I am much more than that. Paul is a servant in Christ. As deacons, elders, and pastors in the church, you must be willing to go that extra mile for the church and especially for the congregation. You must be willing to do whatever it takes to help bring people back into the fold. To bring the sheep back into the fold of the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. As a congregation, we have been blessed to be without problems, whether they be infighting or financial. We must praise God for that blessing. However, in time, a problem will occur. Someone will step on someone else’s toes, or perhaps something will not be put away correctly. In another’s mind, this will become a big deal. Pastors, elders, deacons, and members of

² 2 Corinthians 11:23

the congregation, you will have to put on the humility and servitude of Paul and tell that other member that it is not as bad as they think. We can rectify this. We can resolve it. This is servitude in the Church, to go that extra mile for the people and keep members close like a family.

Paul continues to write about his sufferings as an apostle. He writes that five times he was whipped thirty-nine times (the Greek it says forty times minus one). In the Levitical law, you were not permitted to whip a person more than forty times³ for fear that anything over forty would bring death. Therefore, the Pharisees, who tried to keep the letter of the Law, would never want to whip someone more than forty times. In an effort to ensure that they did not miscount, they would stop at thirty-nine. Paul received this type of beating five times. In addition, Paul was beaten with rods and also stoned. Most people did not survive stoning (I am not aware of any person outside of Paul in the Bible that survived a stoning). Stephen was stoned dead⁴. However, Paul was stoned and lived to tell about it. Paul was shipwrecked three times and he details the list of dangers he faced while on those journeys. The life of an apostle is filled with suffering. Many of you have talked to me about membership growth. Right now, for instance, the mega church is popular and you wonder why our congregation is not growing like the mega church. There is a cautionary tale concerning this type of growth. Some of these congregations have pastors who preach the prosperity gospel. They preach “Name it and claim it” or “Believe it, receive it”. They tell their members that if their faith is strong then they will have a good life. Paul has a word for them. Paul is calling all of them out and saying, living the Christian life guarantees you absolutely nothing on this earth of

³ Deuteronomy 25:3

⁴ Acts 7:54-60

any good. Your rewards and benefits will be received in heaven. Your ultimate fulfillment in the Christian life will be received when you are called up to live with your Savior. Paul did not live a fantastic life and he had faith much stronger than I could possibly ever have. His faith was worn on his sleeves. He lived through persecution and still praised God about it. He was beaten, labored and toiled without sleep, and hungered and thirsted without food. How many days are you able to go without food? Following Christ does not guarantee the prosperity that I have heard preached by some pastors of the larger churches. Mind you, they are not all preaching this false hope, but the ones that do are no better than the preachers Paul is speaking about in Corinth.

Paul continues to tell the Corinthians that even though he has been through many trials, he still preaches Christ. His ancestry is not important to him and Paul now wants to speak of his gifts. Fourteen years ago, Paul says that he was called up into the third heaven. The Jewish people used this phrase as a description of heaven itself. The third heaven consisted of the skies, atmosphere, space, and all that lies beyond where God dwelled. Paul called up into the third heaven and the things he saw there were inexpressible. During Bible study last year, we went through the book of Revelation. Many of you asked, "Why is this book so difficult to understand?" It is difficult because John was attempting to put the unexplainable, that is his vision in heaven, into words we could understand. Paul saw the same thing and decided that he would not even attempt to describe what he saw. It is inexpressible, yet wonderful. There are pastors who will tell you exactly what heaven will look like. Remember, Paul and John saw heaven and they were unable to completely convey what they saw. Do not let false teachers lead you astray. Heaven is beautiful, but no one knows exactly what it will look like.

Paul did all of these things and yet he was given a thorn in his flesh. I have had many people ask me exactly what Paul's "thorn in his flesh" was. I was not certain myself, so I began to look up commentaries to find out what other theologians thought the thorn was. The first commentary I opened stated that, "the thorn in the flesh is difficult to understand, but it is one of five different things". I read through the five possibilities, but it was clear that the author did not know for certain what this thorn actually was. I opened up my second commentary by respected theologian John MacArthur. John MacArthur writes that the thorn, based upon Hebrew idioms, could be one of nine things. I opened my third commentary by Hendrickson, who is my favorite New Testament commentator. Hendrickson writes that the thorn in Paul's flesh could be summed up as one of fifteen different things. After reading these commentators, I must tell you that I have no idea what Paul's thorn in his flesh is, but it was something that tormented Paul. It could have been a disease or possibly an ailment. It could have been something psychological or something physical like epilepsy. Perhaps, it was a demon that Satan used to torment him. All we know for certain is that this thorn in his flesh caused Paul great grief and the Lord allowed it. The Lord permitted this to happen in order to keep Paul humble. In the Greek language, the word which is translated into English as thorn has the connotation of torment, smack, or ruffed up. It is the same word used for when the waves crash against the sand when the waves are coming in. Some days, at the beach, the waves are so rough that you are unable to get more than ten to fifteen yards out without being knocked over. Those waves hit you and just as you are getting your balance there is another one that hits you right in the back of the head. I cannot imagine what this thorn in the flesh was, but I can tell you this, it was painful.

This thorn brought sorrow and Paul begged God to remove it. However, the Lord said, "No". I am paraphrasing God's response, but He said that in weakness, you will find my power. The Lord gave Paul this burden in order to keep him humble. Paul rejoiced in that weakness. I do not have a thorn in my flesh and yet I still find myself complaining about little things in life. These complaints do seem to humble me. In this land, we have so much. In fact, we have more than enough. Paul is telling us that he has been through so much more than either you or I and he still praises Christ. He is a fine example and that is why our prayer of the day today said to inspire us to be like Paul. What a great example to follow. His focus and his praise was always on Christ. He was always looking to the future of what was to come. We should too. We should pray for ourselves for strength and endurance to run the good race. Being a Christian is not easy and Christ never promised that it would be. It is difficult and Satan wants you to fall. We should pray for your elders, and deacons. Keeping people happy in the family is not easy and if Satan wants you to fall, then he wants your leaders to fall all the more. If Satan can find a way to prevent this congregation from keeping focused on Christ he will. You should pray for our congregation, too. We are growing and we are happy. We are helping not just our community, here, but the world: nationally, internationally, and locally through our benevolence funds. We are helping the seminarians down at Trinity School for Ministry to go out into the world and preach Christ crucified. If Satan wants you, the elders, and the deacons to fail, just think how much more he wants future pastors and their congregations to fail. In all you do, however, praise Christ. Give Him the glory. He reigns over this whole mess and His Father sent Him here to save it. That

is the message today from the epistle. Do not listen to fools, but guard, protect, and listen to only those who preach Christ and the Word of God. Amen.

SERMON OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION:

A message for the church and especially leaders in the church.

Homiletical Point: You must not listen to fools, but guard, protect, and listen only to those who preach Christ from the Word of God.

1. Paul begs the Corinthians to stop listening to fools which are taking advantage of the Corinthians and leading them astray.

Explain: Enslave; Exploit; Take advantage; Push themselves; Slap in the face

Illustrate: Bullying (in school or in the church)

Apply: You must do what is right both morally and spiritually

2. Paul does this by boasting of his ancestry and devotion to Christ.

Explain: Hebrew; Israelite; Abraham's descendent; Christ's helper (deacon)

Illustrate: Hiring of our deacon to be a helper of Christ

Apply:

3. Next, Paul boasts of his past experiences that his Christian walk has produced in his life.

Explain: (See above)

Illustrate: Prosperity Gospel – believe and receive (Name it and Claim it)

Apply: Being a Christian will not bring you good fortune on earth

4. Again, Paul boasts of his spiritual gifts given unto him to solidify his life of faith in Christ.

Explain: Man taken to the third heaven (paradise); Could not tell anyone

Illustrate:

Apply:

5. All of this yielded no great rewards on earth, indeed, a thorn that caused him great torment.

Explain: Thorn in his flesh; Messenger of Satan; Tormented (*attack, rough up, illness, waves*) me

Illustrate: Waves at the ocean – smacking you around

Apply: Your boasting is in Christ and not yourself

6. Yet, Paul continued in his mission to preach Christ because Christ's power comes through Paul's weakness.

Explain: Be glad of your weakness – Christ's power rests in this weakness

Illustrate:

Apply: Your praise and focus should always be on the prize at the end of the race - heaven

CONCLUSION:

Pray for yourself – being a Christian does not grant you an easy life on earth

Pray for your elders and deacons – the devil desires to take them down

Pray for your congregation – Satan is pleased with the dwindling church and furious at singing voices

Pray for your pastor – they are not a hired hand and the devil targets the leader

In all, praise Christ who reigns over all the mess on earth as His kingdom expands graciously