

“Simple, Pure Devotion to Christ”

2Corinthians 11:1-15

August 22, 2021

We are nothing and have nothing short of Jesus being our everything. Yet when our lives are simply and purely centered on Christ as our everything, our souls are eternally secure and satisfied in God.

Scripture Reading: 2 Cor 11:1-15

The greatest threat to the church today is not the world, though the rapidly deteriorating culture is certainly an increasing threat to our current norms. The greatest threat to the church is ‘worldliness’ within the church. Where the church is centered on the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ, it will stand faithfully in the face of every test: affliction, persecution, and death. But where we have sought to be like the world (consciously or unconsciously), we will find ourselves weak-kneed and stumbling under the pressure of testing rather than being proven by it.

We are in a portion of 2 Corinthians where Paul is addressing false teachers. And the most dangerous false teachers are not those who preach an anti-Christian message, but those who subtly draw us away from the cross-road of the crucified Jesus as our sufficiency and lure us to an enculturated, self-exalting, Christianity where Jesus exists merely for our self-fulfillment or where the apex of life is found in Jesus plus something else (hence undermining the sufficiency of Christ for a God-exalting, soul-satisfying life).

The primary application of 2 Cor 11:1-15 is that ***we must guard ourselves (and the church) against self-promoting, false teachers by centering our minds and lives on the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.*** The simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ implies that Christ is sufficient—you don’t need anything else, just the straight up gospel-truth of Jesus. But false teachers will use Jesus’ name to sell their self-promoting message. So, simple pure devotion to Christ requires that we can discern a *truly* Christ-centered message that is in keeping with His character, life, and teaching. Be

ware of anyone who attempts to modernize the timeless Jesus or offer a better gospel through new revelation.

Let me suggest 5 principles from our passage regarding the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ:

1. **Simple, pure devotion to Christ means all boasting should be in the Lord and not in self (2Cor 10:17-11:2).**

We have to pick up at the end of the chapter 10 because we are in a continuous river of thought. **[10:17-18]** It is not our job to be self-promoting. This was not a new idea with Paul. In Jeremiah 9:23-24 the Lord says, *“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.*” Our boast is not in our knowledge of God but in the God we know whose ways are lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness.

Later through the lens of the cross, Paul said, “May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal 6:14). The mercy and grace of God eliminate all human boasting. This is why Paul refers to human boasting as foolishness in 11:1. Human boasting is foolish because it focuses on personal distinctives and experiences rather than calling attention to the Lord as the giver of all things in Christ.¹ If fact, Paul began his first letter to the Corinthians by reminding them that God had chosen those who were humble and ordinary “so than no one may boast before God” (1:26-31).

And yet Paul now pleads with the Corinthians in 11:1 to bear with him as he briefly speaks like a fool—that as, as he boasts of his own human credentials as an apostle. Remarkably, we won’t even get to Paul’s ‘foolish talk’ until next week because vs. 1-15 simply serve as a disclaimer as to why he needs to present his credentials. Paul is uncomfortable speaking of himself but he must do it to defend the creditability of his message. Notice Paul’s motive in **[vs. 2]**. His motive is not to exalt himself, but to exercise godly jealousy and concern for the Corinthians. In ancient times, a young couple was betrothed

¹ Scott Hafemann, NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians, pg. 424.

(legally married to one another) about a year before they actually began to live together. This ensured that the bride was pure (not carrying another man's child). Just as it was the father's responsibility to present a pure bride to the groom, so Paul sees himself as a spiritual father to the Corinthians who must present them as a pure bride to Christ, unadulterated by a false gospel. Thus, Paul is willing to defend his credentials as a means of defending the true gospel message (even if it requires a little foolish boasting) out of concern for the Corinthians loyal to Christ.

Paul articulates his concern most directly in [vs. 3-4]. This brings to light our second principle.

2. **Simple, pure devotion to Christ protects us against the satanic deception of false teachers who peddle a distorted gospel** (2Cor 11:3-4).

I refer to the false teachers as satanic in their deception not only because Paul compares them to the serpent that deceived Eve (3), but also because Paul later refers to them as Satan's servants in vs. 15. Earlier, in 2:17 Paul charged them with "peddling the word of God" which means they were using the gospel for selfish gain, to make money. When the serpent came to Eve, he was not seeking her good. He was seeking control—destructive control. He was greedy for attention—vain glory. And the two most common traits among false teachers are control and greed for money. And the way they peddle their self-promoting gospel is by appealing to our natural desires for health, wealth, and ease of life.

So Paul urges the Corinthians (and us) to not let our minds be led away from Christ and the way of the cross. In vs. 2 he urges them bear with a little boasting on his part—and they ought to, given how "beautifully" they have tolerated those who have preached a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and therefore a different gospel.

3. **Simple, pure devotion to Christ means putting our confidence in the substance of the gospel rather than human means of persuasion** (2Cor 11:5-6).

Scholars debate what Paul means when he says in vs 5, "I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles." Paul could be saying that he is not inferior to the Jerusalem apostles. Yet in the context he seems to be sarcastically referring to the false apostles who claimed to be 'super apostles,' superior to Paul. These false teachers were skilled, trained orators of persuasion unlike the ordinary men that Jesus chose as his disciples. Men, who Acts 4:13 tells us, were uneducated and untrained men but were recognized as having been with Jesus.

Regardless of which way we take vs. 5, it doesn't change the point Paul is driving to in [vs. 6]. In Paul's day, philosophers prided themselves and even competed to see who could be most persuasive over an audience with their rhetoric. The substance of their message was secondary and could be modified because what mattered most was not *what* they persuaded people to believe but their *power* to persuade (to gain control over people's emotions); much like a movie that is intended not to be truthful but to gain a hold on people's emotions. Paul despises and refuses to use any means of human persuasion that is manipulative by playing on one's emotions or psychology. He has only one approach: proclaim the truth and rely on the Holy Spirit to convict and persuade people to respond in faith.

This is why back in 1Cor 2 Paul said, "*when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.*" True conversion is not the result of human persuasion, but of the Holy Spirit's conviction. In fact, emotionalism sets people up for disillusionment and deception because they believe they have taken a step of faith when, in reality, they have merely experienced an emotional response void of truth.

There is a fine line that we need to discern between creative, fresh approaches to engaging people with the gospel and secularizing ministry. There's a big difference between pursuing fruitfulness or looking successful in our culture. The point is this: we must never trade gospel substance for what is trendy or popular. Updated methods are fine as long as they serve

the true substance of our message. This is why Paul emphasizes knowledge in vs 6. His focus is on the true substance of the gospel.

The American church has got to apply the litmus test of substance. Is he a good preacher because he is entertaining to listen to and he appeals to my natural desires or because he presents the substantive truth of Christ as compelling? [candy preacher] Is the worship great because of the atmosphere, lights, great music, and emotion? Or is the worship good because we sang real truth that invigorates our souls to love God for who He is? There's nothing wrong with lights or atmosphere per say, but we must not exchange 'experience' for *substance*. Don't misunderstand me. Our walk with the Lord should be experiential. We should experience the nearness of God, the joy of the Lord and the conviction of the Holy Spirit. But truly 'experiencing' God is the result of encountering the truth of God. Let's be a church that uses means as best we can to keep the gospel truth of Jesus central.

4. Simple, pure devotion to Christ is modeled in true servants of Christ who sacrificially serve others rather than exalting themselves at the expense of others (2Cor 11:7-12).

[7-12] The false teachers were promoting themselves for the purpose of financial gain. Paul, on the other hand, did not receive financial support from the Corinthians. Not because it is wrong for a minister to be supported by the church but because Paul was protecting the gospel from a cultural snare. Essentially, Paul refused to accept money from the Corinthians to make a very clear distinction between himself and his message, and the false teachers who were driven by greed. Because of the social expectations in the Greco-Roman world, it was offensive to the Corinthians for Paul not to receive their support. They believed (and claimed) that the value of one's message was based on how much people would pay for it. But Paul modeled his ministry after Christ who embraced personal poverty for the purpose of providing true spiritual riches to us (8:9). Paul would rather receive support from the poverty-stricken Macedonians and take a chance on offending the wealthy Corinthians, because he would not take a chance on enculturating the gospel in way that would blur its message or diminish its power. We can't pay or contribute anything to our salvation. And the Corinthians had to come to terms with the fact that the gospel only benefits those who come empty-handed, acknowledging their spiritual poverty.

So when you here someone boasting today that their credibility as a minister is based on their prosperity (or their elite spiritual experiences like

visions and revelations—exalting themselves), they are probably more interested in your money than they are in helping you walk the humble road of the cross.

5. Simple, pure devotion to Christ call us to embrace the personal responsibility of developing biblical discernment because false teachers disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2Cor 11:13-15).

[13-15] Some people teach falsely because they themselves have been pulled into deception to a certain degree. But overall, when the Bible addresses false teachers, it does not present them as well-meaning yet merely mistaken believers. Rather the Bible presents them as enemies of the cross (Phil 3:18), Satan's servants. Yet they disguise themselves as servants of Christ. That means that today, their books are sold under Christian labels by 'Christian' publishing companies and their message is broadcasted on Christians stations. Here's my point: never assume that 'Christian' packaging contains Christ-centered substance. *You must make it your personal responsibility to develop biblical discernment by evaluating everything you hear the filter of the gospel as Jesus defined it.*

For example, Jesus said, *"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."* Do you realize that when Jesus said "let him deny himself" he just eliminated 90% of Christian pop culture? Don't misunderstand me, the Christian life is one of victory, triumph and joy yet we triumph on the road of the cross. False teachers want to offer you an alternative road that either 'rises above' suffering, sickness, and hardship by their method of elite faith, or a road that requires additional legalistic rules and regulations to supplement God's grace.

Our goal is not to become overly critical (negative) toward other neighborhoods in our Christian world, but rather our goal is to not take anything into our minds without scanning it for truth and error.

Let me conclude with an illustration of how subtle and significant false teaching can be, because it's easy to assume that false teachers are kind of whacky and only appeal to people who don't know the Bible at all. When in

reality false teaching is very popular (I will mention his name not to shame anyone whose read his books, but to demonstrate how appealing and close false teaching gets to us). Many years ago someone attending our church asked their small group to study a certain book by a popular Christian author. When their small group leader asked me about it, I said, “well, let me read the book.” I tried to come to the book open-minded but immediately my antennas went up when in the introduction he credited his message to a vision in which he sensed Jesus speaking to him (7). The book had incredible appeal because it was asking questions like, *why is life so hard and why is the abundant life so rare?*

Those questions appeal to me! Didn’t Jesus promise abundant life and don’t all of us want abundant life? The question is, what did Jesus mean by abundant life? Should we merely equate that to a life of success on earth? The author was such a good writer that many times I would sense that something was off but struggled to put my finger exactly on the error. He even quoted scripture whenever it could be used to support his version of a gospel that he articulated more positively than Jesus did. His message was that God’s glory is really about us reaching our full potential as though God’s happiness is dependent on ours (10-12).

He saw Satan as the main problem in our world rather than sin (12-13). The result is that we are seen as victims rather than rebels (34)—which points to ‘therapeutic’ gospel rather than a gospel of repentance. And so this author called his readers to focus not on the cross but on miracles, healing, and hopeful aspects of the faith (64-65). For example, he said the cross was never meant to be the central symbol of Christianity (64). Rather, we should focus on the resurrection—do you see how slippery that is (1Cor 2:2)? As with every false teacher, once in a while their lack of competence in the Scriptures is blurted out, as when he said, “there is a widespread belief among Christians today that the heart is desperately wicked” (pg 54). That’s a reference to Jer 17:9, but then he went on to say, “it is a crippling belief and it is untrue” (54). How did he get away with saying Jer 17:9 is untrue? He suggested that a new heart in Christ is void of sin’s crippling effect. This is what many false teachers do. They take the promises of the fully

sanctified heart in our heavenly state and apply them to the present moment when we are still being sanctified. Instead of teaching progressive sanctification as the Bible does, they suggest that we can live *above* the road of the cross where God does His work of sanctification (hence their emphasis on the triumphal life and the absence of teaching God’s purposes in affliction).

So, what was John Eldredge² teaching? He was teaching *positive thinking therapy* under a Christian label. What was instructive for me in reading this book, was discovering how subtly yet significantly his ‘positive’ message diminished the glorious doctrines that we cherish at the heart of the true gospel. I gave our small group leader 8 reasons to take back to his small group as to why we would not use this book.

- It diminished the sovereignty of God and overly elevated Satan
- It diminished the cross and replaced it with positive thinking
- It diminished the depravity of sin and the need for progressive sanctification
- It diminished the role of the mind and replaced truth-living with experientialism from the heart
- It diminished the daily need for the gospel in our battle against sin
- It diminished repentance
- It diminished a proper contextual use of Scripture
- It diminished the glory of God and elevated man to point that God’s glory was dependent on man reaching his full potential.

Now, did John Eldredge diminish these doctrines intentionally, or did it just happen through the course of loose thinking? I don’t know but he did it successfully page after page. In the end, the author used the NT to present a different gospel, a ‘more positive one,’ and in process led his readers away from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ, by replacing the road of the cross with the road of self-fulfillment.

Our take-away from 2 Corinthians 11 is that we must never underestimate the power of deception clothed in light and therefore we must anchor our minds and hearts in the Scriptures so that we will not be led away from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.

² *Waking the Dead: The Glory of a Heart Fully Alive*