

Don't Get Sucked In 2 Corinthians 11

We are in 2 Corinthians 11 this morning, which, as I described last week, is believed to be part of a second letter contained in this book, written a few weeks or months after the first. Titus and company showed up in Corinth carrying the first letter only to find that Jewish false teachers had quickly made inroads into the church and were leading many people astray. They went back and reported this to Paul who was deeply agitated and quickly wrote this response.

This chapter has a lot of information about that particular situation, but we're also going to see a simple and very helpful guide to know how to identify false teachers. This is especially important in our day and age of celebrity preachers, internet, and smart phones. We have easy access and can watch all kinds of gifted speakers who are very smooth, persuasive, and fun to listen to. They are very knowledgeable and have a lot of charisma. They are very good at what they do!

But how do you know which ones are good, and which ones are off? We watch them and trust them because with all their knowledge and skills we assume they must be under the influence of the Holy Spirit and preaching biblical truth that accords with God's will. But time has shown that many of them are spiritually immature or empty. Some are unknowingly being used by Satan to lead people astray, and some are knowingly leading people away from the biblical gospel we believe, because they're convinced of their own perspective. And they don't even need to get you to deny Christ or the faith, they just need to get you off course so you're distracted and ineffective.

They exist in Christian cults of course, which are pretty easy to spot, but they're also in all the various streams of Christian theology, including evangelicalism. They use language we're used to hearing. They talk a lot about Jesus. They use a lot of Scripture. They treat people who disagree with them like fools. Most of them know more than we do and can teach in a way that is very convincing and they seem totally legit. How are we supposed to see through all this to know who they are?

The very same thing was happening in Paul's day. There were all kinds of gifted preachers going around from city to city and some of them were good, but some were false and leading people astray. They were very effective, very convincing. They knew exactly what to say and many people were quickly led astray. That's what was happening in Corinth and Paul was beside himself with frustration. Today we're going to see him put that frustration into writing and give a simple guide to know how to weed out the false teachers from the true. It's a guide we can and should use today because it's still just as relevant as it was back then.

I'm going to cover all of chapter 11 pretty quickly to start with, but then we're going to come back to one verse near the beginning that will give us our guide to follow and expand on that. Remember, Paul is ticked off when he's writing this...

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-6.

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ²For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³But 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. ⁴For 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. ⁵Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. ⁶Even 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.

He's asking them to bear with him as he demonstrates some foolishness. He's going to use the deceptive and manipulative tactics of the false apostles to try to point out how foolish they were being for falling for such tactics. He's going to point out the fact that if he did what they did, he would blow them away by his credentials. It wouldn't even be a competition. He purposefully hadn't been doing that because it's fleshly and boasting in oneself, when the only one anyone should boast in is the Lord.

He says he's resorting to this foolishness because he's jealous for them like a father for his beloved daughter whom he just betrothed to an honorable man

to be her husband. He raised her, cared for her, taught her, protected her and found the perfect man for her. But after the betrothal, other men started showing up, trying to convince her that her father and the man she was betrothed to were poor choices and that they would be much better for her. And rather than trusting her father and her betrothed, she actually listens to these other men and entertains their advances.

So Paul is jealous and afraid – he’s afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the cunning of the serpent, the Corinthians would be deceived by the cunning of the false apostles as well. They have far too readily listened to these false teachers who proclaim a different Jesus, bring a different spirit, and proclaim a different gospel.

Paul begins to point out that he’s not in the least inferior to the false apostles, whom he sarcastically refers to as “super-apostles.” He might not be using the same kinds of speaking techniques (which was intentional), but his knowledge goes far beyond theirs. And this has been made clear to them in many ways. He’ll point out other ways he’s superior to the false apostles later on, which again he considers to be foolish – he’s only doing it because the Corinthians were being drawn away by such methods.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:7-15.

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!

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.

In Paul's frustration over them so easily turning to the false apostles, he asks them if it was a sin for him to humble himself and not receive payment for preaching the gospel to them. Why would this be a sin? Because he received support from other churches in order to preach in Corinth free of charge, and if they followed the false apostles it would be like he was robbing the other churches. He also received support from some Christians from Macedonia who visited him while he was in Corinth so he wouldn't burden them. That's what he did and would continue to do in order to not be a burden.

He says this boasting will not be silenced in Achaia... I think he's saying he wouldn't hide his love for them and intent to not be a burden throughout that region. Everyone would plainly see how much he loved them and made sacrifices for them. I think this is meant to be a contrast to the behaviors of the "super apostles" who would have been taking money from the Corinthians and not demonstrating love for them.

The super-apostles were boasting how important their mission was and claiming that they were working according to the same terms as Paul and his team. So Paul would continue to refuse payment in order to prove they were lying. These guys were false, deceitful, hypocrites – just like their master, Satan.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-21a.

I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. ¹⁷What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. ¹⁸Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. ²¹To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

Paul reiterates that he's acting like a fool... but to keep reading so that he could do what the fools were doing, which was boasting of themselves. He's not doing this with the Lord's authority, but as a fool. He's doing the same thing that others are doing since the Corinthians so readily get sucked into it. Even though the false apostles were making slaves of them, devouring them, taking advantage of them, putting on airs, even abusing them, they were

putting up with it. Paul sarcastically says he and his team were just too weak to do that to them!

And now Paul goes into a long list of his credentials to stack against the claims of the super-apostles.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:21b-29.

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. ²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

As Paul goes through this list, he is basically saying and proving that none of them comes even close to having the same credentials. So he doesn't want to do this, but he's doing it to point out how foolish the Corinthians were being for falling for this kind of boasting.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:30-33.

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Paul says that the only things he'll truly boast in are his weaknesses. He shares a humiliating experience – one of the first times he was persecuted he had to hide in a basket that was lowered through a window so he could

escape. This is what Paul will boast in and in a couple weeks we'll see how he does that in chapter 12.

For now I want to go back and look at a great 3-part guide in verse 4 that can really help us avoid getting sucked in by a false teacher.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:4: *“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.”*

So he gives three ways the false apostles were leading them astray, which provides us with 3 things to look for to identify false teachers.

The first thing they do is proclaim another Jesus than the one Paul did. Have you ever seen that happening in other so-called “Christian” groups? Some are so blatant that we’ve written them off completely as Christian cults – the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons have such different beliefs about Jesus that it’s pretty easy to spot once you get into it. A Jesus who isn’t God (JW’s) or a Jesus who is the offspring of heavenly father along with his evil brother Satan (Mormon’s) is not the same Jesus as the Bible!

But there are other versions of Jesus that are maybe a little harder to spot. There’s the Jesus who’s all about loving sinners, tolerating sin, and fighting for social justice – welcome to the mainline churches in America. Then there’s the Jesus who’s still hanging on the cross and offering an ongoing sacrifice of his flesh and blood administered through the Holy Eucharist at Catholic Mass. Then there’s the Jesus who says, “All you have to do is believe, or ask Jesus into your heart, and then it really doesn’t matter how you live.” Then there’s the Jesus who steps aside and puts all the attention on the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit. Then there’s the Jesus who died and rose again for our salvation but will only give it to us if we get baptized and confirmed. And there’s more...

If anyone proclaims another Jesus than the one proclaimed in Scripture, they’re a false teacher whether they’re trying to be or not. Don’t get sucked in no matter how fun they are to listen to. And devote your life to knowing the real Jesus so it’s easy to spot the counterfeit.

The second thing false teachers do is bring a different spirit than the one received from Paul and his team. The implication is that he's talking about the Holy Spirit – the power, signs, and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. When Paul did gospel ministry, the spirit that people received was a Spirit of faith, hope, and love. It was a spirit that sometimes manifested in speaking in tongues, healing, casting out demons, prophecy, boldness, and gifts of the spirit, but always belief in the gospel, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. The spirit was secondary to and serving Jesus and the gospel.

I can't find anywhere in the New Testament that the Spirit manifested himself in people being slain in the spirit, holy laughter, barking like dogs, glory clouds, gold dust. I can't find churches that were fascinated by and focused primarily on seeing more spiritual signs and wonders. As exciting as these kinds of experiences may be, if anyone seems to be pouring out a different spirit from the one Paul was pouring out in the NT, your false teacher alarms should be going off. Don't get sucked in.

The third thing false teachers do is preach a different gospel than what Paul preached. This can certainly correspond with proclaiming a different Jesus, but I've seen some who basically proclaim the same Jesus, yet a different gospel. They will say that there was a gospel for the Jews and a gospel for Gentiles and they are different. Jews were saved by faith + works while Gentiles are saved by faith alone. After understanding what these mean, neither is biblically correct – both stray from the biblical gospel. But people really get sucked into it. We've lost several families over the past several years to this distorted gospel. There are other gospels being proclaimed as well, but I alluded to them earlier.

We need to know the gospel – really know it! Paul's gospel wasn't just for Gentiles, it was for Jew and Gentile alike, he said so himself. There is one gospel and one way of salvation and we need to be very clear on what it is, because if we're not, how can we have confidence that we're saved? If someone preaches a different gospel than the one Paul proclaimed, he or she is a false teacher. Don't get sucked in.

Here's what happens a lot: you start listening to a new Christian speaker or preacher. Something about their style really hits home for you and all of a sudden sparks a renewed interest in the Bible or growing in your faith. You develop a loyalty to that person and you trust what they say. They're biblical. So you basically stop doing your own Bible study or listening to others and focus your attention on what this person is teaching.

Some of those teachers are actually solid and won't lead you astray, even though it's still a bad idea to become such a loyal follower. But more of those teachers than you realize are not solid. They're just good speakers. Don't get sucked in. Don't give that kind of allegiance to any man or woman. Test everyone, including me:

- Do they proclaim a different Jesus?
- Do they bring a different spirit?
- Do they preach a different gospel?

Do you know enough to know if they are? The reality is that many of us don't know enough, or we get blinded by our favorites, but the awesome wonder of the grace of God is that he's given us other protections to make up for that. He's given us the body of believers to help us discern truth from error. Listen to what your brothers and sisters are saying to you, especially if it's about that person you love listening to. It's much easier for people to smell a rotten egg if they're not feasting on them.

And listen to your elders, and I'm talking about the elders in the local church. God has called us to protect the flock from wolves in sheep's clothing. If we warn you about someone you're listening to, take heed of our warning. We're here to help you grow in your faith, and we'll only warn you if we hear of something we think is endangering you.