

2 Cor 11:7-15 Distinguishing True Servants of God from Charlatans, part 1

Christianity as a whole—all those people and churches who claim to be Christian—is in a terrible state. Many people who claim to be Christians are not genuine Christians, and many churches that claim to be teaching the Gospel are not teaching the Gospel.

That's true today, and it was true even in the early church. Very early on in Christian history, false teachers brought “damnable heresies” into the churches and led people astray. Much of this theological error was due to biblical ignorance and illiteracy. The church is gullible and susceptible to error because many have abandoned the truth.

G.K. Chesterton famously said that when people abandon the truth, they do not believe in *nothing*; they believe in *anything*. Neglecting the truth and believing in falsehood has led to divisions, sects, and cults. And this threat to the church is not primarily from the outside; it's from the inside. The real dangers come from within the church, from teachers and preachers who claim to be teaching the truth, but teach error. The people who do the most damage to the church are those who claim to speak for Jesus but actually are servants of Satan.

The Bible repeatedly warns us against false teachers and their harmful influence within the church. Sadly, false teachers had infiltrated the church at Corinth while Paul was still ministering there. And the great tragedy is that the people of the church were tolerating them; they were allowing these false teachers to have authority and influence within the church, much to Paul's dismay. The book of 2 Corinthians is largely Paul's response to the false teachers in Corinth.

.7 “Did I commit a sin...” This seems to reflect an accusation or criticism against him. So he's responding to these accusations.

Just like the church at Corinth was in danger of being seduced by these false teachers and being led away into error, so the church today is under the same threat. In fact, the modern threat is perhaps even worse than it was in the early church. Today there is much more falsehood influencing and infiltrating the church than ever before. In spite of the fact that we have more access to the Bible and to solid teaching than previous generations, many people still seem to be susceptible to false teaching and theological error. Many churches are turning away from the biblical truth. Immature, gullible, ignorant people lack discernment because they don't know the truth. They then become susceptible to false teaching and false teachers. They, in turn, ruin the church.

In today's passage, Paul distinguishes himself from the false teachers. He wants his readers to see the stark difference between a true apostle and the false apostles. He shows us what distinguishes true servants of God from charlatans.

Let's begin by looking at some characteristics of a true servant of God. These qualities were true of Paul, and they should be true of anyone claiming to serve God. We should all aspire to develop these qualities. And we should expect these qualities in our spiritual leaders.

I. True servants of God want the best for the church. .7-11

A. .7 True servants of God humble themselves for the benefit of those they serve.

1. The word "humbled" (*ταπεινω*) refers to causing something to become low.
 - a) Because of the Gospel, Paul was living in poverty and danger much of the time. He gave up a comfortable life to proclaim the Gospel.
 - b) Paul denied himself for the benefit of these people. He took the position of a servant and neglected his own desires for the benefit of the church.
 - c) He worked a very humble job—he was a tent-maker. That means that he made tents and worked with leather. The Greeks would have thought of that as menial work, not professional work.
2. .7a His humility led to the Corinthians' exaltation. To be "exalted" (*ὑψωθητε*) refers to causing something to become high/lifted up.

He's talking about salvation. To be saved is to be exalted. The believers in Corinth were "exalted" or lifted up through the Gospel. Their faith in Christ lifted them up out of paganism into Christian salvation, out of the darkness into the light. And they experienced that because Paul was humble; he gave up everything to bring the message of salvation to them.

App: Humility is one of the marks of a true servant of God. Such people do not exalt themselves; they work to lift up others. They deny themselves for the benefit of others. We should follow that example of humble service for the benefit of others; that's a mark of a true servant of God.

- B. .7b-9 True servants of God are not motivated by money.
1. .7b Paul preached the Gospel free of charge; he didn't ask the Corinthians for money.
 2. The accusation/criticism against him seems to have been that he *should have* taken money from the Corinthians. The fact that he did not charge for his services made him seem suspect to some of the people.

That might seem odd to us; we would appreciate someone providing a service for us for free. We would not think badly of someone for doing that. But in the ancient Greek culture, public speakers usually charged for their services. Philosophers, teachers, orators—they all were trying to make money through speaking. They charged a fee to hear them speak. The best orators charged the most.

So to provide a service for free would imply that the service was not worth much. Paul's preaching must be worthless because he's not charging anything for it—that was the accusation.

But Paul had a good reason not to charge for his services.

Quote: Paul had the right to ask for financial support, just as God’s faithful servants do today; but he had deliberately given up that right so that nobody could accuse him of using the Gospel simply as a means of making money. He gave up his “financial rights” for the Gospel’s sake and for the sake of lost sinners who might stumble over anything that gave the impression of being “religious business.”¹

3. Paul was able to serve the church at Corinth without taking a salary from them because other churches supported him through their gifts.

.8 “I robbed other churches...” He’s speaking metaphorically here—it’s a figure of speech; he didn’t actually rob anyone. He’s just referring to the financial support others provided for him. He uses the word “robbed” because the churches that supported him financially were quite poor. Accepting money from poor people is almost like robbery, at least in Paul’s mind.

.9 “the brethren who came from Macedonia supplied” what he needed. He accepted “wages” from them to serve the people in Corinth.

That was Paul’s normal practice. Once a church was well-established and operating independently, Paul would accept financial support from them. But he would not take money from a church that he was trying to start.

4. Paul often worked as a tentmaker to earn money so that he could continue to preach the Gospel and start churches free of charge.

Acts 20:34 ... these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.

2 Thessalonians 3:8 [We did not] eat anyone’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 670.

5. Paul refused to take any money from the Corinthians because he wanted to avoid accusations about being greedy or mishandling or misusing funds. He didn't want anything to hinder the Gospel; he didn't want to burden anyone, so he preached without charging a fee.

App: There are a lot of people in our world today who “sell” the Gospel.

Ro 16:18 For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

Tit 1:11 whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.

Sadly, over the last few decades, many pastors have proven themselves to be greedy frauds. Several famous TV preachers were found out to be fleecing the flock. The average unbeliever probably thinks that all pastors are greedy frauds.

One of the major problems affecting churches today is mishandling of funds; that kind of thing happens frequently. We must intentionally avoid any hint of financial mismanagement.

In our modern times, a church has to be exceedingly careful and transparent regarding financial matters.

6. .9end He planned to continue that same pattern—“so I will keep myself.” He had planned to visit them again, and when he returns, he's not going to ask them for a salary; he'll continue to serve freely.

App: We should note here that the NT affirms that it is proper and right for a church to support its pastor financially. Paul himself teaches that “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (1 Tim 5:18) and that “elders that rule well” should be “counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim 5:17).

There is a whole long section about financial support for pastors in 1 Cor 9:1-14 where Paul makes the argument that those who preach the Gospel should make a living from that occupation. So Paul is not teaching that preachers should serve without pay.

One of the qualifications for pastors is that they be free from the love of money; he should be free from greed and materialism (1 Tim 3; 1 Pet 5). The pastor's intent is to *feed* the flock, not to *fleece* them.

App: Missionaries typically follow Paul's example here. When they start a church, they don't take a salary from that church. They get support from other churches and people. The church plant is not saddled with the missionary's salary. Paul worked as a tentmaker to fund his calling as a church planter.

In many churches, the pastor has to work another job because the church cannot pay him a reasonable salary. We call such people "bi-vocational" because they have to work two jobs. Many pastors work a job on the side just to make ends meet.

People who are willing to work bi-vocationally to serve the church deserve a lot of credit. They are making substantial sacrifices for the benefit of the church. And the people of the church should appreciate the sacrifice the pastor is making so he can serve.

All churches should strive to provide an adequate salary for their pastor. I'm glad that our church has done that for me.

C. True servants of God work for the benefit of those they serve.

1. Main idea: vs. 9b – "I was a burden to no one... I kept myself from being burdensome to you." To "keep from being burdensome" means that he had the best interests of the people in mind. You don't want to be a burden to people because you want what is best for them.
2. When the church is just getting established, it is a benefit not to have to pay a pastor. If the pastor can secure other sources of support during the founding years of the church, it allows the church to use those funds to get established and start functioning. E.g., rent a facility, get chairs, get SS curriculum; get everything up and running—takes money.
3. Once the church becomes stable and self-supporting, it can then begin paying the pastor's salary. Until that time, it's often best for the pastor not to take a salary from the church.

D. .10a True servants of God tell the truth.

1. Paul had the truth within him because he had Christ within him. And that inner truth came out as he preached.

2 Corinthians 4:2 *But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but **by manifestation of the truth** commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

2. Unlike the false teachers, Paul was a man of honesty and integrity, not deceit, craftiness, or shame. He did not corrupt the Word or sell it. He was no hypocrite. He spoke the truth in all situations.

3. .10b And he was not about to change his policy of honesty—"no man shall stop me from this boasting in the regions of Achaia."

- a) Achaia was the southern part of Greece. The city of Corinth was the major city in the region of Achaia. Macedonia is to the north; Achaia is in the south.

- b) There may have been other churches in this region, and Paul's policy would be the same with them. He would serve the churches without asking for a salary or payment of any kind.

- c) That was his "boasting" was all about—he was not in it for the money. He would continue to work without charging people for his services.

App: Honesty is an important qualification for pastors. Pastors must have "the truth of Christ" within them. They must proclaim the truth and they must live the truth. That should be true of anyone serving the church.

- E. .11 True servants of God love those they serve.

1. The false teachers were apparently claiming that Paul didn't love the people at Corinth. After everything that Paul had done to serve those people, they accuse him of a lack of love? That is a ridiculous accusation.

One commentator described this claim as a "shocking and monstrous insinuation."²

² Phillip Hughes, quoted in MacArthur's message on the passage. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/47-76/marks-of-a-true-apostle-truth-love>

2. He responds to such accusations by the curt expression, “God knows.” (“I do” is added by the translators in some versions). He experienced all sorts of suffering, opposition, persecution, and tears to serve the people at Corinth, and now they are questioning his love for them? Wow.

2 Corinthians 12:15 *And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.*

App: That short expression, “God knows,” implies that God is aware of the value of our service for others. Even if those we serve don’t love us or don’t show any appreciation for what we do, God still values our service to them.

Heb 6:10 *For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.*

It may be that SS or nursery kids don’t seem to be very appreciative of all your work—“God knows.” No one else may understand, but “God knows.”

3. What is a biblical definition of love? Doing what is best for the other person. Paul demonstrated in every way that his highest goal was doing what was best for those people.

App: One of the marks of a true servant of God is his desire to do what is best for the people he serves; that’s how we demonstrate love. He’s willing to “spend and be spent” for the benefit of his people. He’s willing to endure the hardships and costs of the ministry because he wants to see his people prosper spiritually—that’s true love.

Illus.: Parents often sacrifice much for their children, and sometimes those children have little appreciation for what the parents have done. We call such children “brats” because they fail to appreciate their parents. That happens in some churches.

F. .12b True servants of God protect those they serve.

1. He wants to “cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are...” I.e., he stands strongly against the false teachers; he wants to “cut off” any opportunity they might have to claim apostolic authority for themselves.

2. Paul wants to “cut off” any influence the false teacher might have within the church. He stands strongly against them; he is very intolerant of these false teachers.

App: Likewise, we must be intolerant of error, especially on the main doctrines of the faith. We can have flexibility on some issues; we may interpret some passages differently than others. But if someone is teaching another gospel or promoting another Jesus, we can have no tolerance for that. The proper response to such people is to cut them off—to stand boldly and decisively against them.

This passage shows us several marks of true servants of God:

1. They humble themselves for the benefit of others,
2. They are not motivated by money,
3. They tell the truth,
4. They work for the benefit of those they serve,
5. They love those they serve, and
6. They protect those they serve.

Paul had all these qualities, and anyone serving within the ministry of the church should have these same qualities. We should strive to be true servants of God’s people.

It’s sad that many churches seem to have little appreciation for those who serve the congregation humbly, sacrificially, honestly, and lovingly. They take the pastor for granted and often create all kinds of problems for him. Some churches neglect, overwork, and underpay their pastors. Churches like that often chase away good pastors; they can’t keep a pastor. I’m glad that such has not been my experience.

These are qualities that all of us should aspire to and pursue. Even if you are not in vocational service, these marks should be true of you. The more of these qualities you have, the better a servant of God you will be, and the more beneficial you can be for the church.

All of this is based on the idea that you are involved in some form of service, some aspect of ministry. Perhaps you ought to think about how you can serve God and God’s people in the context of the church.

If we had more people with these qualities, the church would be in far better shape. Let's protect our church from false teachers by making sure those who serve here have these qualities.