

2 Cor 11:16-33 Paul's Foolish Boasting, part 1

Prov 26:5 says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

Sometimes, when interacting with fools, it's appropriate to use methods that you would not otherwise use. It is at times appropriate to use stern, severe, even harsh language when dealing with theological error and false teachers.

As we get closer to the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul gets more animated and emotional in his writing style. His exasperation with the people of the church is showing through in this section. I get the sense that he's really frustrated with the fact that the people of the church are putting up with these false teachers. So he uses some rather severe language here in an effort to show how foolish it is to follow the false teachers instead of remaining faithful to the Gospel and to him.

Note how many times he uses the word "fool" or "foolish" in this passage—5 times in vs. 16-21. Paul admits a couple of times here that he's speaking foolishly, but he feels like he has to lower himself to the level of fools in order to get through to his readers. Read 11:1—this section is a continuation of "a little folly." He recognizes that it's foolish to brag or to compare himself to others, but he had to show the difference between himself and the false teachers.

In fact, he admits (.17) that he's speaking foolishly and "not according to the Lord." That is, he knows that he's not following Jesus' example of meekness or gentleness (cf. 10:1). He's defending himself in a way that Jesus never did—"according to the flesh" (.18). Some of his statements here are downright sarcastic if not insulting, so this is rather pointed language. If the Corinthians want to compare him to the false teachers, then Paul will do likewise—he'll compare himself to them. He'll show that the false teachers have nothing to brag about compared to the things he could brag about.

All these statements by Paul show that he's a true apostle and more worthy of loyalty than the false teachers are. He's trying to show that he has more credibility than the false teachers; he has better credentials; he's done much more than they have. Whatever claims they can make, Paul's claims are much greater. So he's trying to show the vast difference between himself and them in an effort to get the Corinthian church to listen to him rather than to the false teachers.

We, like the Corinthians, should be able to see the difference between a true servant of God and a charlatan—a fraud, a phony. Our loyalties must lie with those who are true servants of God, not with false teachers. We must remain faithfully committed to the Gospel and to those who proclaim it truthfully. And we must not tolerate fools and their errors and abusive behavior.

The passage contains two main parts. First, we see the foolishness of the church, primarily the fact that they tolerate the errors and abuses of the false teachers. And then in the second part, Paul engages in a little foolish boasting about his own heritage and experiences in serving Christ.

First, let's consider...

I. The foolish errors of the church

Apparently, the church thought of itself as “wise” because it was tolerating the false teachers; but in reality, they were very foolish.

The word “fool/foolish” that's used throughout this passage (ἄφρων) means “senseless, unwise, unthinking, ignorant.”

We see here several ways in which the church was foolish:

A. Thinking of Paul as a fool was foolish. .16

1. .16a “I say again” – cf. vs. 1, where he admits that he's engaging in a little foolishness in order to make a point.
2. .16b Paul is not a fool, but he's speaking here like a fool because it seems like the people of Corinth enjoy this kind of foolishness. If they like fools so much, perhaps they'll like him if he acts like a fool—“receive me as a fool.”
3. The false teachers are making foolish claims that the people of the church were listening to, and so Paul resorts to foolish tactics as well. So he's being ironic or sarcastic here—if the people can tolerate fools, then he'll act like a fool so they'll listen to him.

B. Gladly putting up with fools was foolish. .18-19

1. .18 Many were acting like fools.
“Many boast according to the flesh” – this is no doubt what the false teachers were doing—boasting about their heritage and all their accomplishments. Paul describes that sort of thing “according to the flesh,” that is, worldly, not spiritual, not Christ-like.

App: Generally speaking, boasting is worldly; that's what unsaved people do. We should normally not engage in foolish boasting. It's not Christ-like, and it's often very annoying. We are supposed to be humble and not self-centered, not self-promoting.

Why is Paul speaking this way?

2. .18end Paul temporarily acted like a fool to get through to them.

“I also will boast.” He's about to brag about his accomplishments and compare himself to others because that is what the Corinthians find impressive. It's foolish and not Christ-like, but he's going to engage in a bit of foolishness if it will help the Corinthians understand their error.

So this is somewhat shocking language coming from Paul. We may be surprised that he engages in this fleshly, unspiritual boasting about himself. But he feels like he has to do this to get through to his audience.

3. .19 They were tolerating fools “gladly.”

a) Paul scolds his readers repeatedly for tolerating/putting up with these false teachers. Paul uses this word (ἀνέχομαι) four times in this one chapter.

2 Tim 4:3 For the time will come when they will not endure (ἀνέχομαι) sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

b) In fact, they put up with fools “gladly” (ἡδέως) – happily, with pleasure, i.e., warmly. Paul emphasizes this word in the original language—“*Gladly* you put up with fools.” They extended a warm welcome to these foolish false teachers—a big mistake.

- c) Remember that this whole section pertains to the idea of bearing with/putting up with/tolerating the false teachers. The false teachers engaged in self-promotion and comparisons—foolish behavior, worldly behavior. What was important to them was outward appearance (cf. 5:12) and accomplishments, not godly character. This kind of foolishness should have disqualified them, but instead, the church welcomed them warmly and gladly.

Quote: These boasters evaluated themselves and others from a purely human and worldly viewpoint, without due regard for the divine perspective, and so prided themselves on outward and natural advantages of ancestry and privilege.¹

The members of the church were willing to overlook the character flaws, abusive behavior, and devious doctrine of the false apostles.²

- 4. This was the major problem—tolerating these foolish, self-centered, worldly, proud false teachers and allowing them to have influence within the church. That was a big problem, and Paul is very disappointed that the church is doing this. That’s why he’s so severe in his language throughout this section.
- 5. .19end Tolerating fools is not “wise.”
 - a) Paul is being rather sarcastic or ironical here. In fact, he means just the opposite; they are anything but wise.

¹ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 782.

² Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 19, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 380.

One writer said that Paul is “scathingly ironical” here.³ They thought they were wise, but in reality they were fools because they tolerated false teachers. They were so “wise” that they gladly tolerated fools. Paul’s words are dripping with sarcasm; he means just the opposite—they were acting like fools.

- b) He’s trying to shock them out of their foolishness by using this rather harsh, sarcastic language. He’s trying to help them see how foolish they’ve been acting.

App: The major lesson from this part of the passage is that a church must not tolerate false teaching and bad character and behavior from its leaders. We must not “receive” fools, and that’s especially true regarding spiritual leaders. It’s not wise to tolerate error; it’s very foolish to do so.

One of the most dangerous things a church can do is tolerate error—that’s what leads to liberalism and eventually to apostasy. Churches that tolerate error eventually repudiate the Gospel. Toleration of a little error is a big mistake. E.g., main-line denominations, Methodists.

One of the major responsibilities of the pastor is to protect the church from false teachers and false theology. If this kind of error arises within the church, the pastor must attack it aggressively and boldly—as Paul is doing here. You should expect aggressive action from the pastor.

And if the pastor doesn’t do it, then someone in the church has to do it. The people of the church must be discerning enough to know if someone is leading them astray. They must take bold action to prevent disaster.

C. .20 Tolerating abuse was foolish.

Here Paul gives us a description of the abuse the church was suffering at the hands of the false teachers. Here’s what they foolishly put up with, what they cheerfully tolerate because they are so “wise.” And the focus is not so much on the abuse itself, but on the shocking fact that the Corinthians are tolerating it, putting up with it.

³ Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 390.

What kind of abuse were they tolerating? Notice how Paul describes it:

1. “brings you into bondage” – enslavement, i.e., tyranny/domination (καταδουλόω)—the false teachers were tyrants, forcing some kind severe religious restrictions on the people. Some think the false teachers were trying to impose the OT law on them.
2. “devours” – exploitation/extortion (κατεσθίω) – the word literally means “to eat up thoroughly; to consume completely.” In this case, it refers to exploitation or preying upon a powerless victim.

This may refer to financial fraud or exploitation. The false teachers were likely demanding money from the church. Remember the Paul refused to take any money from them. The false teachers had no such scruples; they demanded money from the church.

3. “takes from you” – taking advantage/theft/craftiness/entrapment—here, the word is simply “takes, receives” (λαμβάνω), but the sense is probably something like “takes advantage of, captures.” In modern language we might say that the false teachers were scamming the church.
4. “exalts himself” – self-promotion/arrogance/haughtiness (ἐπαίρω) – the word here is literally “lifts up,” but the sense is “to exalt oneself, to be arrogant, to dominate others, to put on airs.” These people were arrogant self-promoters. They cared more about themselves than they did about the people of the church.
5. “strikes you on the face” – A slap in the face was a huge insult in the ancient world. It’s unclear if Paul is speaking literally or figuratively here. Perhaps the false teachers actually slapped those who disagreed with them. Perhaps he’s talking about causing serious insult or embarrassment. They attack those who disagree, either verbally or physically. Whatever it was, it was humiliating and totally inappropriate.

.20a The main problem here is that the church puts up with it, they tolerate (ἀνέχομαι—endure, bear with) this kind of abusive, humiliating behavior. And what’s worse is that they were tolerating it “gladly” (.19). That is perhaps what Paul is most surprised by—the people in the church tolerate these false teachers and their bad behavior while at the same time criticize Paul for being weak (.21a).

This list of abuse and misconduct—enslavement, exploitation, taking advantage, arrogance, insults—these are the danger signs exposing false teachers. If people do these kinds of things, it’s because they are satanic frauds. We must not gullibly tolerate such abuse and false teaching. We must see the difference between godly leaders and abusive tyrants.

.21a The difference between Paul and the false teachers is that he never did anything like this. He did not enslave, exploit, insult, abuse, or take advantage of any of them. He didn’t promote himself; he did not lord his authority over them. He dealt with them in humility and even weakness. Abuse like this comes from false teachers, not true apostles.

App: Why would a church put up with this kind of abuse? Religious commitment is a rather strange thing. Some people will tolerate incredible abuse from their religious leaders because they think that such leaders are sent from God. In some churches, the pastor is untouchable, beyond criticism. “Touch not the Lord’s anointed” (1 Chron 16:22; Ps 105:15). That has led to serious abuse in some churches.

Religion in general and even Christianity has had its share of tyrannical or dictatorial leaders. And, for various reasons, some people put up with it; they tolerate it; they permit it. Some people like a very authoritarian leader—they put up with it “gladly.” They expect to be humiliated and insulted by the pastor. They see the pastor as the highest authority who cannot be questioned no matter how he abuses people or misbehaves.

We must affirm that the pastoral office has authority. The pastor is the overseer, the shepherd, the president of the assembly. However, he’s not an abusive, tyrannical dictator. He serves at the pleasure of the congregation, who can dismiss him at any time. He’s supposed to be a Christ-like, humble, diligent servant of the church, not an abusive tyrant.

Religious abuse is all too common in our world. Many people claim to have been abused in the church or by people in the church. Church leaders are sometimes guilty of abusing their people in various ways.

Quote: God [condemns] the tyranny, pomposity, and meanness that church despots have inflicted on the church across the ages.⁴

What would be our response to this kind of behavior? We absolutely do not put up with it; we don't tolerate it. Paul would call us fools if we tolerate such error and abuse. We confront such people, expose their error, demand they repent and change, and put them out of the church if the abuse continues. The sheep must rise up and oppose the wolf or the hireling. This is intolerable behavior, especially within the church. And if a church tolerates it, it demonstrates how foolish and immature the people of the church are. We must have a zero-tolerance policy regarding foolish, erroneous, and abusive false teachers.

And that is especially true regarding the potential for the abuse of children and minors. We must prevent even a hint of such things. If anything like that happens, we must confront it boldly and aggressively.

All of that demonstrates the foolish errors of the church, errors that we must avoid.

⁴ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 489–490.