

Theology Matters

2 Corinthians 11:1–20

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Introduction

Since Easter, we have been working through the book of 2 Corinthians, and for me personally it has been an encouraging and comforting study. Paul has written about how God comforts us in all our afflictions (1:4), how God is worthy of continual trust for future deliverance (1:10), how the prayers of God's people matter (1:11), and how God always leads His people in triumph in Christ (2:14). He has written that believers are Christ's letter to the world (3:2–3), that God has prepared us for eternity (5:5), that anyone in Christ is a new creation (5:17), and that believers can possess joy even amid sorrow (6:10). These are just a few of the promises, comforts, and encouragements Paul offers to the church at Corinth.

But when we come to chapter 10, there is a shift. From chapter 10 to the end of the letter, Paul turns his attention to confront false teachers and the teaching that has influenced and hurt the church. The stakes of that confrontation are set out clearly in 10:3–5:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

Last week we saw that the false teachers measured success by outward appearance, speaking ability, ancestry, wealth, and religious performance. Paul responded that real success is measured by building others up, by faithfulness to God's calling, and by knowing and enjoying the Lord.

Today the focus shifts from the purpose of life to the nature of God Himself. Because not only does what we pursue in life matter — what we believe about God matters. Theology matters. Right belief shapes right action. A well-lived life is built upon a right understanding of God: His power, His presence, and His salvation.

The false apostles had come to Corinth preaching a different Jesus, a different Spirit, and a different gospel. And the result was bondage — bondage to regulation and rules, to fear, to shame, to the grinding sense of never being good enough. Their theology was designed to

cause people to serve and honor them, not to serve or honor God. This is what Paul is confronting in our passage today.

The Faithful Husband and the Deceiving Serpent

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But 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. (2 Corinthians 11:1–3)

Notice what Paul is doing here. He is reading his present moment through the lens of Genesis 2 and 3. Paul is so saturated in Scripture that when he sees a church being led astray, he interprets it through the narrative patterns of Scripture itself. For him, Scripture is not merely a source of proof texts — it is a lens through which to interpret reality.

So let us go back to Genesis 2. God creates Adam and declares, “It is not good for man to be alone.” No helper suitable was found in all the earth, so God forms from Adam a helper fit for him — woman. And when Adam sees her, his response is essentially: *this is the one I have longed for; she is a part of me*. Paul uses that same image for the church. We are formed out of Him, the true Adam. And like Adam seeing Eve, so too does Christ see the church. We are not an obligation He reluctantly accepted. We are not a burden He merely tolerates. We are His beloved Bride. He left the glory of heaven to seek us. He walked our dusty roads, carried our sorrows, bore our sins, and stretched out His hands upon a cross to make us His own.

This is why Paul writes with such passion. Every false gospel, every distorted picture of Jesus, every lie whispered by the enemy is an attempt to steal the heart of the Bride from the One who loves her most.

In Genesis 3, the serpent led Eve to doubt the goodness of God. It began with a question about God’s word: “*Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?*” (3:1). Eve corrects him — just one tree is forbidden, and only under penalty of death. To which the serpent immediately moved to undermine God’s goodness: *Oh, you will not really die. He just knows that if you eat of that tree you will be like Him, and He does not want that. He is holding back on you*. And so Eve was led to trust herself more than the Lord. That bad theology produced bad action. Believing that God was not good, she took what He had withheld.

These false teachers had done the same thing. They had come saying God's word is not sufficient — that Jesus is not enough, that there is something more you need to do to earn His favor.

A Different Jesus, a Different Spirit, a Different Gospel

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. (2 Corinthians 11:4)

What exactly was this different Jesus, this different Spirit, this different gospel? From Paul's other writings, I think we can identify the contours of it.

They preached a Jesus without a cross. The ministry style of the false apostles was entirely triumphant: visible credentials, rhetorical power, spectacular signs. They judged Paul as weak and contemptible in person, and to them the crucifixion was an embarrassment. But not to Paul. *"We preach Christ crucified"* (1 Corinthians 1:23). *"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:2). The cross was God's power revealed through weakness. What the world called failure, God declared to be victory. Without the cross there is no atonement, no reconciliation, no forgiveness, no resurrection, no gospel. A gospel without the cross will always become a gospel of human strength and human glory.

They preached a different Spirit. The false apostles boasted in their accomplishments, sought recognition, demanded honor, and measured success by outward appearance — popularity over character, power over humility, applause over faithfulness. But that is not the Spirit Paul knew. Jesus said in John 16:14, *"He will glorify me."* Wherever the Holy Spirit is truly at work, Christ becomes greater and we become less. If you see the opposite — the person becoming greater and Christ becoming less — it is not the Spirit of God. There are many teachers today who preach a spirit of visible power and impressive gifts, all things that glorify the self. The Spirit of God produces Christlike character in you and magnifies Christ through you.

They preached a different gospel. Their gospel was one in which Jesus is not enough — where His grace must be supplemented by your performance, your ancestry, your spiritual experiences, your religious achievements. That is the message of every false religion in the world. Ancient or modern, the message is always the same: if you want what God has, you must earn it. The rules may differ, but the verdict is identical — God accepts those who prove themselves worthy.

Paul's gospel is the opposite. Jesus Christ has done everything necessary to reconcile sinners to God. Through His perfect life, His sacrificial death, and His victorious resurrection, He accomplished what we could never accomplish. Salvation is not a reward for the righteous; it is a gift for the undeserving. We contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin from which we need to be saved. The gospel is good news precisely because what Christ demands, Christ Himself has provided.

Just as the serpent disguised himself as a truth-teller who cared for Eve, these false apostles disguised themselves as servants of righteousness — and the church in Corinth was being taken in.

Paul's Defense: Exposing the False Apostles

In verses 5 through 19, Paul defends his ministry — not to lift himself up, but to expose these false apostles. Their bad theology is visible in who they are, and the contrasts Paul draws make that plain.

He compares his love for the Corinthians to their love of status:

Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. Even 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. (vv. 5–6)

He compares his generosity to their love of money:

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? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. 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. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (vv. 7–11)

He compares his faithfulness to their love of reputation:

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. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (vv. 12–15)

Paul is still in Genesis here. The serpent disguised himself as one who cared for Eve. These false apostles disguise themselves as servants who care for the church. Neither is true.

He compares his weakness to their love of boasting:

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. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! (vv. 16–19)

If you read on into the following chapter, you will see that Paul's boast is ultimately a boast in his weakness, so that Christ is glorified. But that is next week.

The Fruit of Bad Theology

This brings us to verse 20, and to the harvest that false theology always produces.

For 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. (v. 20)

Just as Adam and Eve suffered the consequences of the serpent's deception, so too does the church suffer under deceptive theology. A false theology produces slavery — there is always one more rule to keep, one more experience to pursue, one more standard to meet, one more failure to feel guilty about. A false theology devours people: instead of building them up, it uses and consumes them, wielding guilt and shame as instruments of manipulation rather than grace. A false theology exalts people rather than Christ, insisting that the teacher be the center of attention. And a false theology humiliates people, leaving them not strengthened but ashamed.

This is what bad theology does to people and to congregations.

Now go back and compare this to what Paul has been saying in the first nine chapters of this book. It is a direct inversion of what the true gospel produces. The true Jesus, the true Spirit,

and the true gospel comfort God's people, deliver them, lead them in triumph, make them new creations, reconcile them to God, and fill them with joy even in suffering.

This is why theology matters. Theology is never merely about winning arguments or possessing correct answers. Theology shapes lives. It shapes churches. It shapes marriages and families. It shapes the way leaders lead and the way Christians love one another.

Wrong theology always bears bad fruit. But wherever the true Jesus is preached, wherever the true Spirit is at work, and wherever the true gospel is believed, God's people are not enslaved — they are set free. They are not devoured — they are nourished. They are not manipulated — they are loved. They are not pointed to men — they are pointed to Christ. And there, in Christ alone, the Bride finds her joy, her freedom, and her rest.

A Word to the Weary

There may be someone here today who has been living under the weight of a false gospel for a long time. You have been told, in one way or another, that Jesus is not quite enough — that God's favor must be earned, that grace is real but performance is what really counts. And the fruit of that message has been exactly what Paul describes: weariness, guilt that never quite resolves, a sense that no matter how hard you try, you are still not enough.

I want to speak directly to you. The gospel Paul preaches is not that God merely tolerates you. It is that Christ loves you. He did not go to the cross reluctantly. He went with purpose and with love — not because we deserved it, but because He set His love upon us and was determined to make us His own.

You do not have to earn what He has already given. You do not have to perform for the One who has already declared you His. The cross was not the beginning of your probation. It was the end of your condemnation.

Jesus said, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”* That is not a conditional offer. It is an invitation from a Bridegroom to His Bride. I welcome you to come to Him today.