

Lies are in the Church

2 Cor 11:1-15

Turn to 2 Corinthians 11 please. The NT speaks of false Christs, false prophets, false witnesses, false brothers and sisters, false teachers, false words, and false signs and wonders (Mt 7:15; 15:19; 24:11, 24; 26:60; Mk 13:22; Ac 6:13; 13:6; 2 Cor 11:13, 26; Ga 2:4; 2 Th 2:9, 11; 2 Pt 2:1, 3; 1 Jn 4:1; Rv 2:2; 13:13). Most these will happen in the church.

We may not assume that is all behind us now, or that it is all somewhere else. The church will not be free of lies before the Lord returns. So, let's be alert. We may *not* accept everything that sounds good, and may *not* reject what at first we don't like. It helps just to know this, that both truth and error float around together in the church. Our beloved church is not immune.

The Corinthian church was not immune either. Let's read God's words to us in 2 Corinthians. First I should warn you that this sermon rambles a bit. I could not find a better way to do this that was faithful to today's Scripture. But errors in the church will go through this all.

Paul's Foolishness and Jealousy 11:1-6

Paul's Foolishness. 2 Cor 11:1 *I hope you will put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, please put up with me!* Paul is going to boast about himself. He just wrote, end of chapter 10, that the one who boasts should boast *in the Lord*. And as soon as he's written that, he is going to go against that and defend himself. He knows it is foolish, but he does not see that he has a choice.

Starting at 11:22 Paul will make a fool's speech. That's what he calls it. Here's what he says right after the fool's speech ended: 12:11 *I have made a fool of myself, but you [Corinthian believers] drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even if I am nothing.*

The Corinthians are dismissing Paul, and his teaching, because they think he is nothing. There are more impressive leaders in Corinth. The super apostles, Paul says with sarcasm.

Let's keep reading: Paul's Jealousy. 11:2 *For, I am jealous for you with God's jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.*

This was Paul's mission: the Corinthian church, and every church, including ours, would be totally devoted to Christ, the way a bride and groom are devoted to each other in the days leading up to the wedding. Paul arranged this marriage, and he wants to see it through.

He would say the same to us: *I am jealous for you [at KCC] with God's jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.*

But something happened: Vv3-4 *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*

The real problem is that they are leaving Christ as well as Paul. They are not devoted to Christ the way they used to be. Paul cannot bring them back to Christ unless they stop dismissing him as nothing. So he must do some foolish boasting.

There is no evidence that there was a doctrinal problem in Corinth. It was more about spirituality, as the lies in the church often are about spirituality. What does God really want from people? If we did just what pleased God, how would that look? What would we actually do? And, how would God respond? What would God do for us, if we did just what pleased him?

Back to Paul's Foolishness. In vv5-6 he commends himself again: *I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles."* ⁶ *I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.*

So, in v1 Paul says he will foolishly boast *about himself*. Then, in vv2-4 he's fears they are leaving behind devotion *to Christ*. He shows God's jealousy to get that *Christ* devotion back. And then in vv5-6, he goes back to commending *himself*.

So is the problem that they are dismissing *Paul*? Or is the problem that they are leaving *Christ*, and receiving a different Jesus and different Spirit and different gospel?

Answer: mainly, they are leaving *Christ*. But Paul cannot bring them back to *Christ* unless he can persuade them to stop dismissing *him*. Dismissing Paul and leaving Christ are bound up with each other in this paragraph and in this whole letter of 2 Corinthians.

The Corinthian Problem: The Experience of Faithfulness

When God has a faithful servant, how does God treat that servant? When people are doing just what God wants, how do their lives look? If people are led by the Holy Spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit, how will those people experience life?

2 Cor 4:7-10. Paul has described his life three times already, and one more is coming. Let's hear Paul describe his experience: *But we have this treasure in jars of clay (i.e. the light of the gospel in weak humans) to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are always hard pressed, but not crushed; perplexed, but not hopeless; ⁹ chased, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

When people are doing just what God wants, how do their lives look? If people are led by the Holy Spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit, how will those people experience life?

The Corinthian answer was: NOT LIKE PAUL! Paul's life was full of weakness and trouble. The Corinthians had no use for weakness and trouble. He was a clay jar. They had no use for clay jars. He was always hard pressed, perplexed, chased, struck down.

For Paul, this life proved he was a genuine apostle. For the Corinthians, this proved that he could not be an apostle of Christ; he was nothing and should be dismissed. This came particularly from the super apostles.

By receiving this false teaching, this Corinthian triumphalism, this misguided "victory in Christ" teaching, this ancient "health and wealth gospel," by receiving this they had received a different Jesus than Paul preached, a different Holy Spirit, and a different gospel.

This teaching led them away from the pure devotion to Christ that Christ's bride should have. And God was jealous, he wanted Christ's bride back, and Paul wanted to make that happen.

Because of this false teaching, they were dismissing Paul. In Christ's mind, Paul was Christ's number one messenger to that church, and Paul knew it. But they began to ignore him, because he was too poor and tattered, too weak and troubled. So he will do a bit of foolish boasting.

One of the things that got Paul in trouble in Corinth was his particular views of how to receive money from churches. They told lies about his policy.

Paul's Unique Support Policy 11:7-12

Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. ¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. ¹¹ Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! ¹² And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

Part way through his missionary life, Paul changed his financial policy. When Jesus sent out the disciples on a preaching tour, he told them to receive hospitality from the town in which they preached. Those people will take care of you, Jesus said, you are earning it, a worker deserves a wage. This the early missionaries did, including Paul, up to the end of Acts 16.

In Acts 16 he was in Philippi, and Lydia took care of him and Silas and Timothy. At the beginning of Acts 17 Paul went to Thessalonica to preach.

But he would not take any money from them, he worked with his own hands to support himself there, and from that point he seems to have done that everywhere. He would gladly accept money from a church he had left. He did that while staying in Corinth, taking money from the Macedonians. He was not against receiving support. But not while evangelizing that city.

Paul never hints that this is the better way for other missionaries. Other missionaries at that time did not change their support policy, and Paul does not think they should. This works better for him, but it does not make him better.

This is how false spirituality gets started. God led Paul to do something different. It really was from God. It was hard for Paul, but it accomplished what he wanted it to do. In our day, we would quickly invite all believers to do this, because it was a better way.

Preach it around, put it in writing, show how God blessed you in this. False spirituality that fast, my brothers and sisters, and there's much of this around us. Paul knew better. If someone else wanted to copy him on this, fine, but he never suggested it.

Paul's Support Policy in Corinth: Wrong and Right Explanation

Wrong explanation: Paul was in Corinth about a year and a half, starting the church there. During that time Paul took no money or material help from those believers. After he left, some of the Corinthians convinced themselves that this was a problem. Either Paul was not a real apostle, or he did not love them, or something bad. "Forgive me this sin of mine," says Paul, more sarcasm.

The explanation v12: *I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.*

There were false teachers and false apostles. They want to say, "we are just like Paul, we do everything he does." They want to be considered equal to Paul. But Paul knew they would never decline money from their audience. False ministers will NEVER say "no thanks, I'll be okay with what I have." So they can't say "we are just like Paul, we do everything he does."

So Paul was often clothed in rags, and often exhausted, because he decided to prove that he was a real servant of Christ by refusing gifts from his audience. That's his explanation.

Detour on Lies in the Church – Turn to Gal 5.

I'm going to leave behind the specifics of 2 Cor 11 for a few minutes and speak about lies in the church. Jesus spoke about the words of God and the teachings of people in Mark 7, and so let's make that our starting point.

Two kinds of lies. One kind takes the traditions of people and takes them as words of God. The other kind of lie takes the words of God and makes it only traditions of people. Both are trouble.

Gal 5:19, the works of the flesh. This is what God wants us to avoid: *The works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, not working together, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, divisions, competing groups ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

These are the words of God, telling us what God does not want to see in his children. What does God want? Here is what God wants, the fruit of the Spirit. When the Spirit does what he really wants, this is it.

The first three are “love, joy, peace.” In Gal 5, context, and usually for Paul, these are not any one person’s inner experience, these are the atmosphere among God’s people: the relational style in the group and in the believing home is loving, joyful, peaceful.

5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. “Self-control” here means that when someone hurts you, and you want to be rude and punish them, the Spirit helps you control that, and be gentle and courteous.

The works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit summarize what God does and not care about. Take this all to heart. It is the words of God. There is no higher spirituality. This is real godliness, not any religious practices, though most of those are good in their own way. Let nothing distract you from avoiding the works of the flesh, and showing the fruit of the Spirit.

Making the traditions of people the words of God. Paul warned Timothy (1Tm4) about deceiving spirits and teaching of demons. Deceiving spirits and teachings of demons come into the church through liars, Paul says, hypocritical liars. What are the actual teachings of demons and deceiving spirits? They forbid people to marry, and they insist on avoiding certain foods.

These rules don’t seem that evil. We might expect worse from demons. If a person decides to not marry, is that a problem? Certainly not, it is one of God’s two good choices. Is it wrong to avoid certain foods? Of course not. Most of us already do that.

But demons, and deceiving spirits, *want false rules in the church.* Demons and deceiving spirits, enemies of the faith, want to create a false higher level of spirituality than Jesus or the Spirit urged. Beware of a false higher level of spirituality than the fruit of the Spirit.

And all of a sudden, it is not enough to obey the Scripture, it is not enough to do what God said. If you want to do something special for God, the way Paul decided to preach and take nothing from his audience, then do it. But once we say it is the best way for all believers, we are helping the deceiving spirits and the teachings of demons by creating a false standard, one not from God.

Many of these are religious practices, certain ways of praising God, certain ways of praying, or reading Scripture. Most of them are genuinely good, none of them are the real call of God.

That's making the traditions of people the words of God. On the other side, we have people *making the words of God the traditions of people*. The best example I could think of in our time and place is matters of marriage and sexuality.

We are not talking about people disobeying God in matters of marriage and sexuality. That has always happened, and it offends God and brings heartache, but we're not talking about sin and disobedience. We are talking about people in the church taking the words of God about marriage and sexuality, and saying, "that's not really words of God. That's just traditions of people."

And this is not just about same sex matters, either, but variety of things under the general heading of marriage and sexuality. The Scripture is clear, Jesus himself was clear, about his high standards on marriage and sexuality.

Christians being weak, and sinning is one thing. Believers have *always* done that. But do NOT receive a different Jesus, or Spirit, or gospel. Let the words of God be the words of God. Keep the traditions of people as only traditions of people. Let the words of God be words of God.

The rest is the traditions of people, you can relax. The detour on lies in the church is almost over. Back to 2 Cor 11.

Why are there Lies in the Church? Because the truth has enemies. ¹³ *For such people [those in Corinth who want to be considered Paul's equals] are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ.* ¹⁴ *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.* ¹⁵ *It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.*

There are false apostles, deceitful workers, acting like messengers of Christ, acting like servants of righteousness. There is Satan himself, disguising himself as an angel of light. We read it 1 Tim 4 that there are deceiving spirits, and teachings created by demons. All of these together are why there are lies in the church.

But there is hope. These lies have been here for 2000 years, lies at the start and still lies today, and cause many troubles. But Christ is determined to keep his people on the right track, and the Spirit keeps leading us to truth. There are always people who read the Scripture carefully and God helps them see the center. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he will see this through.

There is much real godliness in the church, real fruit of the Spirit, real holy living that is determined to stay away from the works of the flesh. There is much of this throughout all the church, and much of it in our group. Let us be the pure and devoted bride of Christ, nothing more and nothing less. Amen.