

Identity Study – 2 Cor. 11:16-33, 12:9-10 - The Boasting of Fools – Lesson Summary

An interesting thing seems to be happening in today's celebrity driven culture. People who've achieved a great level of success in one area of life are suddenly becoming spokespersons in places that they've had little experience. Musicians who've made their living writing vulgar songs and glorifying past crimes are now interviewing presidential candidates. Athletes who have bypassed college to turn pro at 18 are the voice of social reason and injustice. What is it about the accomplishments of these individuals that gives them the green light to speak about anything as experts? As we consider finding our identities in what we've accomplished we'll look at Paul's experience with the church in Corinth and those assaulting his credentials. The "super apostle" celebrities of the day have captured the ears and hearts of the church and it's destroying what Paul had established in Christ.

Paul's initial statements in these verses come from a deep seeded frustration of the boasting of the "super apostles". These individuals boasted in their prominence, talents, financial success, and following while criticizing Paul's credentials. Paul's frustration led to his decision to use the same tactics to address their foolishness. Paul's response is full of sarcasm as he flops the meanings of wise and foolish. Paul, full of wisdom, will claim to be the fool, while the foolish "super apostles" and listeners will be declared wise. Paul is very clear that his response would not mirror Christ's response. However, he believed it was necessary to address this situation. Paul boasts in three main ways. He boasts in his ethnic accomplishments, his failures and sufferings, and the accomplishments of Christ.

It doesn't take long for Paul to clearly address his ethnic equality with his accusers. Paul is a Hebrew just like they were. He's an Israelite and has received the same blessings and rights associated with his heritage. Finally, he has been included in the Abrahamic covenant. In no way is Paul ethnically inferior to these men. At this point, Paul is simply stating undeniable facts in the face of their strong questioning of his credentials. Paul quickly moves on from ethnic accomplishments and begins to address his life's suffering.

Paul's second boast is shocking. As he is mocked for his physical weakness and lack of skill, questioned about his character, and accused of being incapable of true leadership, he focuses on his sufferings rather than his successes. Paul had plenty to boast about. He was a prolific church planter, writer, preacher, fund raiser, visionary, miracle worker, authority, and initiated many conversions. There should be no argument against these qualities. Instead, Paul focuses on his physical suffering. He suffered 39 lashes 5 times, was beaten by rods 3 times, stoned once, and was shipwrecked 3 times. His body bore the marks of a man who had suffered greatly. Shockingly, Paul's greatest burden appears to come from his desire to see the church thrive rather than continue in foolishness. His final boast is an attempt to point out the foolishness of their ways when considering the life of Christ.

Paul concludes his argument with his accusers by pointing out the accomplishments of Christ. Christ experienced the same things Paul had. Jesus' ethnicity and lineage were evidence of His qualifications to be the Messiah. Jesus suffered at the hands of His people as well as the Gentiles. His body bore the marks of one who was beaten, speared, and crucified. Despite all of this, Christ's greatest burden was for people to believe in Him and experience freedom from sin and death. Paul's qualifications didn't come from His strength, skills, or experiences, but by Christ alone. As we conclude our Identity Series, be encouraged. The only image that matters is one that is conformed to the image of Christ. The only choice that defines your identity is that you are chosen by Christ. Being a son or daughter of the King of Kings, brother or sister of Christ, and family with those who believe are your identifying relationships. Finally, the only accomplishments to identify with are the accomplishments of Christ and His finished work on the cross. Your identity should be in Christ alone.

Discussion:

- 1) What defines success in your life? How have you been tempted to look to success for hope?
- 2) God blesses us with talents, experiences, and opportunities that allow us to accomplish great things. How do you balance those accomplishments with humility like Paul?
- 3) As we conclude our Identity series, how have you been encouraged or challenged in regard to your identity?