

AN ANSWER TO FOLLY

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In 2 Corinthians 11:30, Paul said, “If I must needs glory, I glory of the things which concern mine infirmities” (see also 2 Cor 12:5). God inspired this “boast” of Paul’s infirmities to provide a stark contrast with the “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” who were in Corinth and were subverting many in the congregation. A study of 2 Corinthians 11 will give us an opportunity to discern between truth and error.

Paul’s infirmities

2 Corinthians 11:23-29 outlines many of the infirmities which Paul endured for the sake of Christ and his gospel: *“In stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?”* Paul added, “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knows that I lie not. In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me: and through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands” (2 Cor 11:31-33). Paul beseeched the Corinthians to bear with him in his “folly” (2 Cor 11:1). Paul was not actually a fool, of course. And Paul told the Corinthians: “I say again, Let no man think me a fool; if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me, that I may boast myself a little” (2 Cor 11:16). Paul was no fool, but if they were going to think him as such, then they should receive him like they were receiving the actual fools that were among them, referring to the fact that some of these brethren were bearing with false apostles (2 Cor 11:4,12-15).

The folly of false teachers

The false apostles in Corinth were boasting “after the flesh” (2 Cor 11:18). Some of these Corinthians were suffering these fools gladly (2 Cor 11:19), and even allowing them to rob and physically abuse them (2 Cor 11:20). Because of Paul’s godly jealousy (2 Cor 11:2) and his fear that they might be corrupted by these ministers of Satan (2 Cor 11:3-4), it was necessary for Paul to indulge in some boasting of his own to expose these false apostles for what they were. Paul said, “That which I speak, I speak it not after the Lord, but as it were foolishly, in this confidence of boasting.

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(continued)

Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also. For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise” (2 Cor 11:17-19). Boasting is “not after the Lord.” This does not mean that Paul was not speaking by the inspiration of God here, because he was. But he was going to boast, and boasting is not ordinarily “after the Lord,” but in this case God was inspiring Paul to boast for an important reason. Thus, Paul was speaking *as it were foolishly*, but it was not foolish in reality. Paul’s boasting would appear foolish from the standpoint that he was using boasting to answer the foolish boasting of the false apostles. This is an application of the teaching in Proverbs 26:5 to “*answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.*” But the nature of Paul’s boasting was different from the false apostles. They were boldly boasting in their genetics. Paul demonstrated that whatever they boasted about concerning themselves, Paul could say the same thing about himself. Therefore, whatever they used to try to “prove” their credentials as an apostle or minister of Christ, they could not use to discredit or disprove Paul. Paul said, “*I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak. Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also. Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labors more abundant*” (2 Cor 11:21-23). Paul showed the true difference between himself (and any true servant of Christ) by boasting about his infirmities (2 Cor 11:23-33). All true Christians suffer persecution (2 Tim 3:12). These false apostles certainly did not esteem sufferings. Whatever they boasted in, Paul could match and then some. But what Paul boasted in, they could not touch at all. These verses completely exposed those men for what they were: *false* apostles, *deceitful* workers, and ministers of *Satan* (2 Cor 12:13-15).

By their fruits ye shall know them

Today, many members of denominations allow their “pastors” to take their things, and to browbeat and abuse them, and keep them under his control, much like the Corinthians were allowing those false apostles to do to them (2 Cor 11:12,20). We have the opportunity to be like Paul and make a clear distinction between the behavior of Christ’s true servants and these false teachers. The goal is to get the people to judge the fruits and to recognize that the ones they have been following are false (Matt 7:15-20). To do this, we should not boast of ourselves or our own sufferings. We have this inspired text of 2 Corinthians 11 for that very purpose. We should use this text to expose false teachers for what they are, and to encourage men to follow only Christ.