

Acting with Integrity

2 Corinthians 11:5-15

Before Christmas we looked at verses 1-4 of chapter 11. My sermon was entitled No other Jesus where we had the message that we don't let others entice us with a different Jesus to the one that we have trusted and follow. That's what had happened at Corinth.

The people Paul was facing had tried to convince the believers at Corinth that they were spiritually superior to Paul - Paul calls them "so-called apostles" here. The NIV uses the term "super apostles". They claimed superior knowledge, superior eloquence and superior financial clout because they were selling the Corinthians a better spiritual product. They were happy to boast about how spiritual they were.

So Paul turns his attention from the Corinthians to the super apostles. He's been quite kind to them up until now, so he turns his full attention to them. We can tell from the way that he words this here and what has been said before, what they were saying about him. The implication is that he wasn't a slick speaker, he always attracted trouble because of his preaching, he hadn't charged them enough for his services, therefore he couldn't be much good. They were questioning his integrity.

Anyone in Christian ministry always comes up against criticism and the worst from of criticism is usually when one's integrity is being questioned. The most frustrating thing is having to hear of this criticism when you know that before God, you have done what you have before God and with a clear conscience. Someone once said "*sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me*". Rubbish! Gossip, falsehoods, nasty insinuations, rumours and the like can immensely hurtful and as Paul found with the Corinthians can damage reputations.

Many years ago my first job was the warden of a small group of almshouses in Tottenham run by a Christian organisation. The ladies in these flats were all supposed to be Christians, but one or two were harshly critical and sharp tongued, particularly at this young married couple in the warden's flat. I found what was said very hurtful because it was simply warranted and untrue. Our Pastor's wife, who was one of the trustees of the flats, perceived this was an issue and asked my how I felt about it. I told her. Her reply was simple "are you clear before the Lord that you have acted in a proper manner". Yes I was clear. "In that case," she said, "the problem is theirs, don't worry about it."

It's an important principle. Whatever we do we should do as to the Lord. There will always be people that question our integrity - satan likes to undermine God's people - all we must do is ensure that we are indeed acting with integrity at all times; to serve God and people with a clear conscience.

That said I'm sure Paul had broad shoulders, but believers in Corinth were being hurt by the nonsense these people were preaching and the church was in turmoil. In this case he had to respond and defend both his integrity and the integrity of the church - people were getting hurt. Sometimes broad shoulders are not enough. Incidentally I think the pastor's wife had a quiet word with all my sharp tongued protagonists. I might have been young and inexperienced with dealing with these people, but she never let people get away with that kind of behaviour.

So how does Paul defend his integrity. How does he do that? Firstly he outlines the manner in which he sought to bring the gospel to them, which was a direct contrast to the super apostles. There are three distinctives he brought.

- knowledge
- without an ulterior agenda
- humility

◆ Knowledge

6 Perhaps I am an amateur in speaking, but certainly not in knowledge; we have made this clear to you at all times and in all conditions.

Paul wasn't eloquent and polished as an orator like they were. Before the days of TV, politicians were often very impressive orators e.g Nye Bevan, Michael Foot. They impressed people. These days politicians use media in a different way to impress. But it stands as a warning to us. Just because

speakers are eloquent and presentations polished doesn't mean that they are being truthful and right. Perhaps I am an amateur in speaking, but certainly not in knowledge. Paul may not have been slick, but he knew his stuff: he was a learned man and this comes out in his letters. He knew his Lord and he knew his stuff.

Never confuse knowledge with delivery. I've heard some impressive Christian speakers over the years. But they are men and can be wrong and looking back I realise that when I was younger, I often accepted their word because they were good speakers. Did they really know what they were talking about? I never checked as I was supposed to. There is no substitute for the word of God. Always think through what you've been taught and put it under the scrutiny of God's word.

◆ Without An Ulterior Agenda

7 I did not charge you a thing when I preached the Good News of God to you; I humbled myself in order to make you important. Was that wrong of me? 8 While I was working among you, I was paid by other churches. I was robbing them, so to speak, in order to help you. 9 And during the time I was with you I did not bother you for help when I needed money; the believers who came from Macedonia brought me everything I needed. As in the past, so in the future: I will never be a burden to you!

The super apostles had their own agenda - making a living out of preaching. Their career depended on how much money they could extract out of the punters. Any blessings they brought to the people were probably attributed to the amount of money they were collecting. One of the characteristics of money driven evangelism is that the givers will get something for their gift - riches from God, answers to prayer, a special free gift that will bless them. But money can so easily end up as the motive and take over. I cringe when I see Christian leaders driving around in expensive cars they have been donated by followers and living in an opulent style. There's something wrong with that.

I guess Paul realised this in emphatically making sure that he never expected financial support - and would never be a burden to them. We know Paul was a tentmaker, but at this point he was receiving support from churches in Macedonia. By the logic of the super-apostles, Paul was robbing the Macedonians because they had given him money for ministry and weren't benefiting from it themselves which is why Paul uses this term "robbing". He wasn't of course. We are quite familiar with the concept of giving money to support others on different mission fields. The super apostles weren't.

◆ Humility

Paul by contrast wasn't eloquent or rich. What characterised his bringing of good news to the Corinthians? Firstly humility and secondly love.

7b I humbled myself in order to make you important. Was that wrong of me?

As in the past, so in the future: I will never be a burden to you! 10 By Christ's truth in me, I promise that this boast of mine will not be silenced anywhere in all of Achaia. 11 Do I say this because I don't love you? God knows I love you!

And they knew it too. It was his boast. He put them first. It was his boast that he would never be a burden because he loved them and put their needs first. His integrity was clear for them to see. He put them before himself and personal gain and that as his boast.

All these are important principles when we bring the gospel to people because we need to bring it to people with integrity. Our good news isn't a fine set of words that we convince people with. We bring knowledge that when acted upon brings people into a living relationship with the living Jesus.

We must ensure that we never have ulterior motives for bringing good news to people - either gain for ourselves or another cause that will take precedence. Most of all, bringing good news is about showing our love to others. It's usually humility and love that impresses before the message does.

Finally there is the negative side of dealing with those who question our integrity. Paul speaks clearly just what he thinks of the super apostles.

13 Those men are not true apostles--they are false apostles, who lie about their work and disguise themselves to look like real apostles of Christ. 14 Well, no wonder! Even Satan can disguise himself to

look like an angel of light! 15 So it is no great thing if his servants disguise themselves to look like servants of righteousness. In the end they will get exactly what their actions deserve.

They are a con. They are presenting themselves as Christians, as apostles. They are claiming to be one thing but they are something else. It is something Paul was faced with and still something we are faced with today. When someone is preaching a gospel that looks and sounds different to ours. When they preach another Jesus; then stop and think. However good they look, however moral they seem, however eloquent they present themselves; are they disciples of Jesus, or something else. Paul reminds us that even Satan can disguise himself to look like an angel of light. We can easily be fooled. The Corinthians had been fooled.

It is a contemporary message. The internet allows us to reach people in new ways, but is also a portal for people to communicate another Jesus. The same is true of television. We more than ever need to understand how to speak good news with integrity, particularly as we start to embrace new ways to present people with God's unchanging truth. We need to be wise so that Satan won't trick us into things we think are good but are a trap. How do we do that? By having the knowledge and the right motives; humility and love.

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