

Women's Bible Study

Shared Lives: Shared Discernment

2 Corinthians 11:1 – 15

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I thought we would begin this morning/evening with a story. I really enjoy reading great pieces of literature that I missed as a child. As my children are introduced to wonderful books through school and church, I read many of them for the first time as well.

This is one of those books. It is my youngest daughter Sarah's well-worn copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*. *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory of a Christian's journey. The main character in the book is named "Christian" and he is on a journey from the "City of Destruction" to the "Celestial City". Along the way he visits intriguing places and encounters many interesting and some sinister creatures.

The author, John Bunyan had very little formal education; and yet *Pilgrim's Progress* is considered one of the masterpieces of English literature. It was written in 1675 from a jail cell. It is one of the most popular books of all time. Sarah has the old English Version on CD. I am shocked it has not disintegrated from continual playing. However, this translation is written in contemporary English. Sarah actually picked out this selection to go with our study today.

In the late afternoon, Christian and Hopeful, now a little tired from their journey, came to a place where another path joined their path. In fact, both ways seemed to go straight ahead, and neither pilgrim could decide which way to take. Both seemed fair, and both seemed to head toward the Celestial City. "Which way?" asked Hopeful. Christian shook his head. "I do not know." "Gentlemen, perhaps I may be of some service." The smooth voice came from a tall figure covered entirely by a hooded white cloak. They did not know how they could have missed seeing him standing there before. "Do you know the way to the Celestial City?" Christian asked. The figure nodded slowly. They could not see his face, since it was shrouded by the white hood. "I wait here for pilgrims such as you, who are on their way to the Celestial City. Many have followed me before, and now I offer my small services to you. Would you too care to follow me?" Christian turned to Hopeful, speaking quietly. "I do not like this fellow. He is too . . . hidden." Hopeful agreed. "And yet, he is dressed all in white. Perhaps he is one of the Shining Ones who live in the Celestial City, sent here to be a guide for pilgrims." "Perhaps." Christian thought for a moment, then decided. "Let us follow him." Christian turned to the figure. "Lead on," he said. So the white figure took the left fork, and almost immediately the path began to lead away from the Celestial City. Christian and Hopeful should have turned back, but the figure moved on ahead, and they followed. The path kept bending around, until finally they realized that they now had their backs to the Celestial City and were going away from it. "Hold!" cried Christian. "This cannot be the right way." The figure stopped and turned toward them. Slowly it raised its perfectly white hands to its hood and lowered it. They saw its face for the first time: It was a grinning skull. "The Deceiver," whispered Christian. They stepped back, but it was too late. A weighted net fell upon them . . .¹

¹ Bunyan John. *Pilgrim's Progress* as retold by Gary D. Schmidt. 1994. Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co. page 66.

We have a short passage to examine this morning/evening, 15 verses; but in those verses we have a very serious topic and a passionate plea from Paul. As we discussed several weeks ago; Paul was overjoyed that many of the members of the Corinthian Church had repented and been reconciled to Paul and to each other; yet there was an unresolved threat standing in the shadows. In the same way that the Deceiver met "Christian" and "Hopeful" on their journey, Paul is concerned that the Deceiver, still lurks in the shadows of the church posing as servants of righteousness.

Scripture Text: 2 Corinthians 11:1

¹I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. ²I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³But 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. ⁴For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

⁵But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." ⁶I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way. ⁷Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. ¹¹Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

¹²And 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. ¹³For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

4 Components of Paul's Ministry

We are going to examine this passage by looking at four components of Paul's ministry to the Corinthians. These components are: The Concern, The Credentials, The Motivation, and The Warning. We will look at how each applied to the Church at Corinth and how they apply to us today.

The Concern

These first few verses of Chapter 11 describe an allegory with three principle characters: the bride-to-be, the husband, and the matchmaker. The bride-to-be is the church. The husband, soon to come, is Christ; and the matchmaker who is concerned for the bride's fidelity is the evangelist, Paul.² Paul as the good friend of the groom and matchmaker is keeping watch over the bride-to-be until the groom comes to consummate the marriage.

Paul is concerned about the church's faithfulness and purity. Being a member of a church is a serious responsibility. Each of us has a role in protecting the faithfulness and purity of our church; and that protection begins with the attention we give to faithfulness and purity in our own lives. We are the bride-to-be. As a modern bride prepares herself for her wedding day she gives great attention to her appearance: selecting just the right dress, and matching shoes; attending to her hair and make-up and all the other details to look her best.

In the same way we as the bride of Christ must give careful attention to our souls. We must attend to the confessing of our sins that we may be cleansed by the blood of Christ from the sins that soil us. We must continue in regular intimate communication through prayer. We must train ourselves from the scriptures and from our experiences to trust Christ completely. We must learn to distinguish the voice of the Holy Spirit from the Deceiver's. We must cultivate the fruits of the spirit. And over all of this we must clothe ourselves in the righteousness of Christ, realizing that we are saved by grace alone.

We also have responsibilities as the friend of the Groom. Paul is the friend of Christ and he feels a tremendous responsibility for this church because he founded it. What about the people you have introduced to Christ or disciplined? Are you taking seriously those responsibilities? One of the Commentators I read issued this challenge:

"Of those who have come to Christ under your tutelage, how many are still growing in their faith? If they still look to you as their primary spiritual advisor, when is the last time you had contact with them? Are you aware of outside influences that are competing for their time and energy? Don't let the day conclude without spending time in prayer for them."³

² Stott, John R.W. *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 1988 page 163.

³ Osborne, Grant. General Editor. *Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians*. 1999. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois. Page 428.

From sitting in from time to time with small groups and in conversations with many of you; I know a large number of you have significant influence in leading others to Christ and in helping them grow in their faith. Some of you are guest speakers at other women's groups in this city; many of you have major leadership roles in ministries to women; many of you have great influence in the development of the faith of children and youth. It is a weighty thing to consider those to whom we have significant spiritual responsibility.

Obviously, we cannot assume this responsibility for hundreds; it will be only a few; perhaps only a handful. But this week think about those for which God has called you to have this level of spiritual responsibility. These are individuals for whom you feel a special responsibility to shepherd in their spiritual development. You may find they are often brought to your mind as you pray. You may feel a specific burden for their care and protection. You may find they often cross your path with no logical explanation. This responsibility is rarely lifelong; it usually lasts for only a season and then that responsibility is given to someone else. Think about how you can minister to those individuals for which God has given you specific spiritual responsibility. You can:

- Pray for them. Perhaps you don't even know where they are today or what they are doing. You can still pray for them.
- Send a note of encouragement. You can e-mail; but what a prize a personal handwritten letter is in our instant communication culture.
- Call them and ask how they are doing. It is rare in our fast paced culture to hear a sincere, "How are you?" followed by a long pause and a real willingness to listen.
- Visit them, meet them for coffee, take a walk.
- Send them a book, an article, something that specifically relates to their life.

The Credentials

Next, we will look at the credentials. It should be obvious from our weeks of study in Corinthians that Paul was not measuring up to many of the Corinthians' expectations; especially the expectations of 1st Century Greek Orators.

Greeks valued highly polished presenters. They nearly considered skilled debating a sport. In fact, the Isthmian Games that were held in Corinth, were kind of the Olympics of the Day. These games actually featured speech contests. The contestants would speak extemporaneously on a given subject and the speaker who could impress the audience the most would win.⁴

⁴ Osborne, Grant. General Editor. Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians. 1999. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois. Page 431.

Additionally, the Corinthians evaluated a speaker by how much he charged. Actually, much like we do today. You can evaluate to some extent the skill or at least the popularity of a speaker by how much they can command on the speaking circuit. Obviously, a popular brilliant speaker could command a higher price than a merely fair speaker, and a fair speaker could command more than a poor speaker. Do you remember, what was Paul charging for his preaching to the Corinthians? Nothing. Given this criterion it appears that some had inferred that his presentations were worth about as much as they were paying him.

Another important piece of information regarding the credentialing of highly polished presenters was the practice of patronage. The practice of paying others for their teaching, was deeply embedded in that culture. When the wealthy provided money to traveling speakers the speakers were expected to accept the money, and provide due deference and gratitude to their patron.⁵ There was also the unspoken notion that you would speak what those paying you wanted to hear.

Paul had voluntarily committed to charge nothing for his speaking. In fact, he helped to support himself, another issue that probably compounded his difficulties in this culture. Prominent Greeks viewed manual labor as beneath them. In Greco-Roman society it was more honorable for a traveling teacher to beg than it was for him to take up manual labor.⁶

You can see the problems Paul faced. Why should the people listen to him an "amateur speaker" with a working class trade? Certainly ministers of the gospel of Christ, like Paul, could rightly expect to be financially supported by those they served. (Matthew 10:10) Paul, however, had chosen not to accept payment from the church at Corinth; I suspect for some or all of the reasons we just mentioned. In 2 Corinthians 2:17, he says, "unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit".

Paul's Credentials

Paul has credentials; but they aren't necessarily what the world respects. Paul was commissioned by Christ himself on the Road to Damascus. What greater credential could a Pastor and Evangelist have? He was specially gifted for the tasks to which God had called him. Additionally, he was a Jew, well educated, thoroughly trained in the law, taught by the best of teachers. He was a Roman Citizen able to relate to and understand the culture, as well as benefit from the privileges of this position.

⁵ Stott, John R.W. *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 1988 page 167.

⁶ Osborne, Grant. General Editor. *Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians*. 1999. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois. Page 433.

Additionally, he had life altering experiences of maturing under much suffering for his faithfulness to preach the gospel. He has conducted himself with great integrity not even accepting a modest payment from the Corinthian church so as not to compromise his ministry. He has even been the witness to revelations from Christ. Lorie will go into these credentials more next week.

Paul is clearly uncomfortable with this whole discussion regarding credentials. It is as though he is trying to grapple with how to explain his credentials in a way the culture can understand; but yet not sink to worldly examples of boasting. This is a worthy consideration for us as well. How do we present the gospel of Christ and our credentials to a world that uses a different set of criteria? Looking to Paul's example we can derive some principles. We want to:

- Generally refrain from self-commendation; but realize there is a place for it; especially when it is needed to defend the message and the ministry.
- Focus on Substance more than style. Style has a place; we can't just ignore it. We obviously want to use well the means of communication available to us; but these issues are always secondary to the content. Paul acknowledges that he is not a trained speaker, but he has knowledge; content, substance. He has the superior skills of Rhetoric, in the ancient art of argumentation and discourse.
- Focus our "boasting" not on ourselves but on Christ. In Galatians 6:14, Paul says, "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world". All of Paul's "boasting" directed his listeners to an awesome God.

The Motivation

Next, we will look at the motivation. There are many motivations to serve others. There are many good motivations to serve others. We can serve out of a sense of duty. We can serve because it is the right thing to do. We can serve because it meets the expectations of others; like when we take our turn in the nursery whether we want to or not.

We can serve because we enjoy it, because there is a need to be filled, or because it is in our area of giftedness. We can serve because someone asked us. Each of these in proper context are good reasons to serve; however, the most excellent reason to serve others is love.

That is Paul's motivation. He loves the church in Corinth. He has gone through a lot of grief with these Christians and yet he loves them. Love for Christ and for his people will compel us to go on when other reasons will not.

Consider your ministries and acts of service. What are your motives? No one else can really tell from the outside; this is a question you will have to answer for

yourself. I am not advocating that you drop all your areas of service because your motive is not love. Rather we should aspire to move from the merely good motivations to the excellent motivation of love. Look at your current ministries and acts of service and ask God to give you a love for the people that you serve; whether these be other women, members of your family, your extended family, families in your neighborhood, your own children, or preschoolers in Sunday School. Love will sustain you in difficult times of ministry. Paul tells us that love was his motive. He really loved these people and judging from their varying responses to him that love was a gift from God.

The Warning

Next, we will look at the Warning. While some in the Corinthian Church, like "Christian" and "Hopeful" in Pilgrims Progress, might be a little naïve regarding the Deceiver and the danger that he poses; Paul is not naïve or deceived. He clearly sees the danger, and passionately warns the church. He is concerned about the ease with which they are being led astray. The Greek word Paul uses for "led astray" actually means "to ruin".⁷ This wasn't just a minor misstep along the path that concerned Paul, this was a serious change in direction that would lead them to ruin.

Nature of the Deception

Paul seems so certain that these men are false teachers. In fact, he is scathing in his assessment. He says they are false apostles, deceitful workers, servants of Satan, masquerading as servants of righteousness. How could he be so sure? What was the evidence? Verse 4, ⁴For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

These teachers were teaching a different Jesus, a different Holy Spirit, and a different gospel. So what does that mean? These are not unlike some of the deceptions we hear today. For example, have you ever heard anyone say, "Well, yes, I believe Jesus was a great teacher" or "Jesus was a good moral person." That is a different Jesus; an incomplete one at best. Jesus was the son of God, not just a good teacher. He was born of a virgin, lived and walked on this earth, was crucified, dead, and buried and on the third day he arose from the grave.

What about a different Spirit? Perhaps this was like the spirit of the New Age, where everyone is listening for their inner voice, or convinced that they have the capacity to be their own God. That is not the Holy Spirit described in the Bible.

⁷ Osborne, Grant. General Editor. Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians. 1999. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois. Page 429.

The Holy Spirit's purpose, is to comfort, to teach, to convict of Sin, and to remind us of the words of Christ.

What is the different gospel? Maybe Paul was referring to the Salvation by Works Gospel, where the atoning blood of Christ is replaced by a doctrine of good works. Perhaps he was referring to the Health and Wealth Gospel. This is the front cover of the July 2007 edition of Christianity Today. The headline reads: Health and Wealth in Africa: How the prosperity gospel is taking a continent by storm.⁸ All of these are examples of a false gospel.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is so simple that even a child can comprehend it and even the most mature Christian can never fathom its depths. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16) Commentator John Stott says, "Christians need to think about what they are being taught rather than being impressed by who is teaching them, however winsome he or she may be."⁹

Know Your Enemy

One of the fundamentals of warfare is to know your enemy. We need to know something about our enemy and his tactics. Satan is his name, and he has been deceiving the human race since the very beginning. His first encounter was with Eve recorded in the book of Genesis, chapter 3:1-4.

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" ⁴ "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman.

Notice the beginning battleground is in our thoughts. We choose to listen to subtle suggestions and we choose to allow them to influence our thinking. Our words then follow the sinful shift of our thoughts, and our actions soon follow close behind. Commentator Henry Morris had this insightful comment on these verses, "The root of all sin is doubting God's Word. Satan used this approach successfully even with one who had never sinned before and who had no sin-nature inclining her to sin".¹⁰

Jesus clearly warned us about Satan and his tactics. He said Satan is a murderer and a liar (John 8:44). Jesus also warns us of Satan's purposes, John 10:10, The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. Peter tells us to, Be self-controlled

⁸ Phiri, Isaac and Maxwell, Joe. Gospel Riches. Christianity Today. July 2007. page 23-29.

⁹ Stott, John R.W. The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. 1988 page 164.

¹⁰ Morris, Henry M. The New Defender's Study Bible. 1995. World Publishing. Nashville, TN page 19.

and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Keys to Recognition

We have a formidable enemy and we need to be alert. Paul says the false teachers are actually ministers of Satan. So how are we going to recognize false teachers, so that we are not deceived? These four points from the Life Application Commentary¹¹ are especially helpful.

1. **False Teachers try to discredit true Christian teachers and preachers.** Notice that Paul welcomed others, like Silas, Timothy, and Titus, who would co-labor in the work of spreading the gospel. This whole situation was certainly not a case of Paul being hypercritical of the skills of everyone else.
2. **False Teachers are self-serving.** They are concerned about themselves rather than the spiritual condition of others. They boast of themselves. They are often concerned with their financial gain.
3. **False Teachers' methods cause division and conflict in the church.**
4. **False Teachers preach a false message.** Including often proclaiming that they have a special message from God that is available to no one else.

Know the Truth

Having an understanding of our enemy so we can be alert to his schemes is a useful strategy. However, the best strategy of all is for us to know the truth. Commentator John MacArthur put it well when he said, "Those who do not understand the truth are incapable of discerning error. The absence of discernment is a logical consequence of ignorance of Scripture, because discernment involves the application of biblical knowledge. Ignorance of doctrine results in spiritual immaturity which leads to a lack of discernment and opens the door wide to Satan's deceptive schemes"¹²

Other helpful questions, also from the Life Application Commentary, help us to identify false teachers:¹³

- Do the teachings confirm Scripture? (Acts 17:11)
- Does the teacher affirm and proclaim that Jesus Christ is the God who came into the world as a man to save people from their sins. (1 John 4:1-3)
- Is the teacher's lifestyle consistent with biblical morality (Matthew 12:33-37)

¹¹ Osborne, Grant. General Editor. Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians. 1999. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois. Page 437.

¹² MacArthur, John. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 2 Corinthians. 2003. Moody Publishers, Chicago. page 363.

¹³ Osborne, Grant. General Editor. Life Application Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians. 1999. Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois. Page 437.

Let's check back in on our Pilgrims and see how Christian and Hopeful are faring in the net.

When darkness fell, the two began to fear the animals that prowled at night. But even more they feared the Deceiver, who would have them at his mercy if he returned. And in fact, not long after it grew dark they saw a white light moving through the trees. It shone so brightly that the light seemed to push up into the sky like a beacon. "Is that the Deceiver?" Christian whispered to Hopeful. "No," replied Hopeful, "it cannot be. The light is so different. It is white, but it seems to be many other colors as well." As it came closer, Christian also grew sure that it was not the Deceiver. And when it was very close and Christian saw the golden features of the One who had come to them, and felt the light that shone so full and real and warm around him, he could not understand how he and Hopeful could ever have mistaken the Deceiver for one of the Shining Ones of the Celestial City.

"What are you doing here?" asked the Shining One. "This is not the path to the Celestial City." "No," answered Christian. "We allowed ourselves to be led out of the way by the Deceiver, and now we are caught in his net." The Shining One took out his flaming sword and slashed the net, but left Christian and Hopeful unharmed. When the two pilgrims stood up and rubbed their strained limbs, the Shining One looked at them sternly. "Where did you stay last night?" "In the Delectable Mountains." And did the shepherds of those mountains tell you to be on your guard against the Deceiver?" Christian and Hopeful both nodded in shame.¹⁴

The great servant of the Lord, Paul, had passionately warned his flock in the 1st Century, and he passionately warns us in the 21st Century. May we heed his warning, using all the spiritual strategies we have been given: putting on the full armor of God and wielding the Sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.

¹⁴ Bunyan John. *Pilgrim's Progress* as retold by Gary D. Schmidt. 1994. Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co. page 66.

Intensive Study Questions for Shared Discernment

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-33. This chapter will actually be touched on in two different lectures; but reading it all the way through will provide some continuity and understanding of the multiple topics.

1. Why do think Paul noted in the first verse that he felt like he was talking like a fool?
2. Paul referred to the responsibility of presenting the Corinthian Church as a pure virgin bride to Christ. What are some other passages in the New Testament that refer to the church as a bride?
3. Reflect for a moment on those that you have helped bring to faith in Christ. Do you have some continuing responsibility in their lives to make sure they are growing in their faith and are continuing as pure brides for Christ? What might some of those responsibilities be?
4. What was Paul's motive for his continued investment in the development and purity of the Corinthian Church? How does this motive have a practical outworking in our lives as we invest in the salvation and spiritual development of others?
5. Based on Paul's example and his charges against the false teachers in Corinth, can you identify from this passage (verses 1-33) some important qualities of a Christian minister?

Discussion Questions for Shared Discernment

1. In this passage, Paul responds to the critics' demands for an answer to their charges. In Matthew 26:63 Jesus gave no answer to the charges presented to him by the Sanhedrin. As Christians how do we discern when to respond to charges against us and when to say nothing?
2. Paul's motive for the continued investment in the development and purity of the Corinthian Church was love. How does this motive have a practical outworking in our lives as we invest in the salvation and spiritual development of others?
3. C.S. Lewis says in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them." What direction do you think our modern day culture leans toward? How about Christians? Do you think that is a Biblically appropriate stance?
4. What do you think are the greatest deceptions hurled toward believers today?
5. What are some obstacles you see in our modern day world and church in exercising discernment?

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