

THE COST OF LOVE

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to a very famous passage in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians where he details all the hardships and troubles which he experienced during his ministry. Amazingly, this list of difficulties he endured -- which sounds very much like someone bragging about his exploits -- comes from the lips of Paul himself.

There is no denying that a lot of people are bothered by Paul. They think he is a conceited braggart. I have had people say to me, "I can't stand Paul. Imagine anyone telling someone, 'imitate me as I imitate Christ.' How conceited." Yet he was not conceited, but in this passage he tells us why he sometimes spoke this way. Boasting was personally very repugnant to Paul. He did it only for the sake of those who were so spiritually immature that they were impressed by outward performances, by flamboyant actions and by unusual abilities. I find that many people are reluctant to talk about themselves because there is this general expectation that if you do not have something terribly dramatic to say you should not open your mouth. I have heard Christians (I am sure there are many of them here), who feel that no one would listen to their testimony because they have never been in prison, they have never been on drugs, they have never been a playmate in Hugh Hefner's Bunnyland, they have never murdered their mother or raped their sister, so what is there to say? A lot of people, unfortunately, feel that Christian testimony has to come from a sordid, lurid background before it has any value in anyone's sight.

That is a good example of the problem that Paul was facing here in Corinth. Many of these Corinthians had been swept away by a group of men claiming to be apostles of Christ who had come from Jerusalem, boasting about all their tremendous accomplishments for Christ. As a result, the Corinthians were in danger of following their false teachings rather than listening to the apostle who had won them to Christ and who had so faithfully taught them and prayed for them and loved them.

Paul explains to the Corinthians why he finally resorts to boasting: It is because that is the only thing that will impress them, and win them back to a hearing of the truth of the gospel. So, very reluctantly and with considerable dislike evident in his reactions, Paul sinks to this level and begins to talk about his accomplishments for Christ. You can see this in the words in Verse 16 and following in Chapter 11, where he says:

I repeat, let no one think me foolish; but even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. (What I am saying I say not with the Lord's authority but as a fool, in this boastful confidence; since many boast of worldly things, I too will boast.)
{2 Cor 11:16-18 RSV}

It is very apparent that Paul does not want to do this. He says he does not have the Lord's authority to do it, i.e., if is not normally right for a Christian to do this. That may come as a surprise, because if you listen to the media or read Christian literature you will find that it is quite normal, apparently, for Christians to brag about who they are, what they have done, where they have been, and what their accomplishments are. But Paul is talking about true, normal Christianity. He says that it is not for Christians to brag about themselves in any way, but he is ready to do so because he hopes it will break the spell that these false teachers have created in Corinth. Some of the Corinthians had so completely swallowed these false teachers' line that they actually put up with arrogance and insult from them without protest. You can see that in what Paul continues to say, Verse 19:

For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! For you bear it if a man makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or take advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! [Obviously that is an ironic statement.] {2 Cor 11:19-21a RSV}

These false apostles were actually becoming arrogant and boastful. The kind of mentality that depends upon bragging to gain people's attention always tends, ultimately, towards arrogance.

I attended a service in another state a few years ago where there were probably a thousand people present, most of them were in their 20's and 30's. The pastor, who had a reputation as a Bible teacher, was teaching from a certain passage of Scripture. I could not quite see what happened, but evidently a young woman sitting in the front rows reached up and patted her hair. This Bible teacher interrupted his discourse and said to her, "What are you doing? This is a Bible study, not a beauty parlor. That's the trouble with you flaky females, and flaky is a good adjective for females," he said. He went on and just ripped into her. She sat there, red-faced and embarrassed, but uttered no protest, and no one else did. Then he resumed his study.

After a bit he spotted a man in the back row (sitting very close to me actually), who was thumbing through his Bible, checking a reference. The teacher said, "There's a man back there who's not reading where we are." He said, "We're in the New Testament and if you are in this Bible study you will be in the New Testament. If you don't have time for what we're studying here you can just get up and leave." Again the whole congregation sat there. Nobody said a word. Evidently this was normal fare for them. I was amazed at what arrogance and what insult people would endure when they were under the spell of somebody teaching falsely from the Word of God.

Now that is what was going on in Corinth. Paul is willing to stoop to this level of bragging about his background in order to show that even on their own grounds he is more credible than these false apostles. So he reluctantly continues boasting of matters which he regarded as of only secondary importance but which these Corinthians were viewing as a mark of success and credibility from their teachers.

Paul goes on, in Verse 21b:

But whatever any one dares to boast of -- I am speaking as a fool -- [Notice how he keeps interjecting this so we will not understand that this is something right.] I also dare to boast of that. {2 Cor 11:21b RSV}

Then he takes up in detail some of the things they were bragging about. First, there was the matter of their ancestry:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. {2 Cor 11:22 RSV}

It is incredible how much stock people put upon their pedigree. I have never been quite able to understand why some people seem to feel that they are better than others simply because their ancestors happened to come over on the Mayflower. (From what I have been told about mine, they met the Mayflower when it docked!) Even clubs have been formed, such as The Daughters of the American Revolution, as though it gave a mark of prestige to be descended from somebody who fought in the American Revolution. Yet that does not say a thing about the worth of the individual involved, does it?

This is the attitude that Paul is talking about. At once he recognizes the foolishness of this kind of thing, and yet he himself does it. He says, "If you think that those kinds of things are important, then you can't reject what I am saying to you because I can outshine them even in these categories. Are they Hebrews? Do they claim to be related to the chosen nation and be able to speak the chosen language? Well, so can I. Are they Israelites? Are they descendants of Abraham? Well, so am I," he says. Yet it is clear that he does not think that this is of any real importance whatsoever.

I know Christians who brag about their spiritual pedigree, although they perhaps would not say anything about their natural pedigree. There is a tendency in Christian circles to boast about what schools you have graduated from, how many degrees you have after your name, whether you have been to the right places, and what churches you were members of. I find that people sometimes seek a kind of spiritual aristocracy because they have been members or attenders at Peninsula Bible Church. But that does not give you anything of value in itself. We ought to beware of this tendency to set stock in these advantages of nature which really tell you

nothing about the individual.

Paul goes on now to speak on the question of activity, Verse 23:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one -- I am talking like a madman [That is what you are when you begin to boast about what you have done for Christ.] -- with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. {2 Cor 11:23 RSV}

Unfortunately, even in the Christian world today there are men who are traveling around getting a hearing because they have endured such great persecution for Christ. Paul says if that is what these false teachers are claiming he can outshine them even in this category. Then he begins to list them:

Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. {2 Cor 11:24 RSV}

That was a purely Jewish form of punishment. The Law of Moses prescribed that for certain offenses you could be publicly whipped with forty lashes. But it also prescribed, according to the Jewish rabbis, that if more than forty were inflicted the man who did the whipping had to receive forty lashes. So to prevent that they were careful not to go quite to forty; they made it thirty-nine, "forty less one." That is why we have this expression here. Now incredible as it sounds (and we have no record of it other than this), Paul had endured that terrible beating five times. The Law also prescribed that if a man died under that, his death would not be blamed upon the man doing the whipping, so it is clear that this whipping was so severe it could take your life.

Paul continues:

Three times I have been beaten with rods. {2 Cor 11:25a RSV}

That was Roman punishment. Paul was a Roman citizen and although the law of Rome decreed that no citizen should be beaten with rods, yet by this time on three different occasions he had been so beaten. (In the book of Acts there is another incident of that nature recorded which comes later than this.) So, because of angry mobs and weak judges, the law itself was disregarded at times and this form of punishment had already been carried out on the apostle three times by now.

... once I was stoned. {2 Cor 11:25b RSV}

We always have to interpret that today -- that was with rocks, not by drugs. This incident is recorded in the book of Acts. In the city of Lystra, where he met young Timothy on his first missionary journey, Paul was actually stoned by a mob and dragged out of the city and left for dead. But God restored him and brought him back to life and to a ministry again. Then he goes on:

Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea [There is an account in Acts of a shipwreck but that comes after this, so that four different times, at least, the apostle was shipwrecked]; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles. danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. {2 Cor 11:25c-27 RSV}

When I read this list I ask myself, "What have I ever endured for Christ's sake?" It makes me feel two things:

- First, grateful that God has never asked me to endure such things. He could have, he could have asked us all to, but he did not. And
- Second, at the same time I wonder if my life has not been over-protected. I wonder if I would react as the apostle did if I were called to endure such a thing.

You cannot read this without being impressed with what Paul endured for Christ's sake.

Then there is the question of anxiety, in Verse 28:

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? {2 Cor 11:28-29 RSV}

Through the course of these thirty years that I have been pastor here, I have been privileged to bear some of the burdens, the sorrows, the pain, the heartache and tears of many of you and share them with you. I confess that it is sometimes a great strain. I have not done very well at it. It makes me even more amazed to think of this mighty apostle bearing the burdens of dozens of churches that he founded, being open to their needs, and praying for them daily. He had never even been to Colossae, he did not start the church there, but he prayed for them, and upheld them before God every day. What a tremendous ministry of mercy this man had! What empathy he shows. What ability to respond to the emotional heart-cries of people. I shake my head in amazement.

As you read a list like this it raises the question: "Why would anyone put up with this kind of life?"

If that is what Christianity can involve, what made this man willing to go through these terrible hardships, pressures, trials and dangers? What motivated him?

The only answer I can find is the one he himself gives us in Chapter 5 of this very letter -- "the love of Christ constrains me," {cf, 2 Cor 5:14a KJV}. It was his sense of gratitude to the risen Lord who not only had forgiven him and filled him and restored him but who went with him into these trials and sustained him in every one of them, turning them into experiences of joy rather than hardship. That love flowed through Paul to reach out to those around to whom he was ministering.

I am always amazed to read the letter to the Thessalonians where he says, "When we came among you we imparted to you not only the gospel but our very lives also because you became very dear unto us," {cf, 1 Th 2:8}. It is beautiful to see the love of this man's heart. I have often said to young people, "When you go on in life, you are going to find a lot of people want to be your friends. Many of them will like you and you will be drawn to them, but many of them will be false friends. You can always tell the difference by this -- whether they are willing to keep on loving you when things do not go well with you, whether they are willing to suffer with you and stand by you, even to stand by you when you offend them. Trust the ones who are willing to suffer for you." That is the mark of love.

Paul has proven to these Corinthians that he genuinely loved them. None of these false apostles would put up with this. As Jesus himself said, "When the wolf comes the hireling runs away but the true shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep," {cf, John 10:11-13}. Paul is simply bringing this out so that they might see where the truth lies and which is the voice they can trust in this conflict of voices that they are exposed to.

Now, at this point, he turns to the things that a Christian can truly boast about. We are not to boast about what we have accomplished, or even how much we have had to bear for Christ's sake, but there are some things we can boast of. Verse 30:

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for ever, knows that I do not lie. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped his hands. {2 Cor 11:30-33 RSV}

Paul reaches back twenty years into the past to this rather remarkable incident that occurred shortly after his conversion, and he says, "If I must boast, this is the kind of thing I am going to boast of." What is it? Well, as he puts it, "It's the things that show our weakness." That is what we ought to be boasting about, the times when we did not look good, the times when we fell on our faces and failed. Paul says that is what he boasts

about. It is so incredible that anybody would boast about that that he takes a solemn oath that he is telling the truth. He says, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for ever, knows that I do not lie. As I look back on my past life, one incident comes to mind more than anything else. It was a time when I was a complete failure at what I was trying to do. That is what I boast in, because that is when I began to learn the most important lesson of my life."

You know, if Paul were alive today, living like many Christians do today, he would have this list of things that he endured printed up and published everywhere, wouldn't he? You would be hearing, "Come and hear the man who was beaten five times for Christ and endured tremendous hardships and dangers. Come and hear this man who has been stoned for his faith, who has been in shipwrecks, night and day, etc." Paul dismisses all this with a wave of his hand and says, "The thing that I want to be known for is the time I was let down over the wall in a basket."

The account in Acts tells us about it {Acts 9:23-25}. After his conversion he went into the wilderness or Arabia for a while. There he undoubtedly studied through the Scriptures to try and understand how he had missed seeing who Jesus was, because he had regarded him as an impostor and a phony. But as he searched he found Christ on every page. He must have seen him in Isaiah 53 and in Psalm 22, in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, in the arrangement of the tabernacle, everything pointed to Jesus. When he came back from that experience he had two burning convictions in his heart:

1. First, that the Old Testament proved that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, because he went into the synagogues and began to demonstrate this to the Jews from their own Scriptures.
2. The second thing that he was convinced of from that experience was that God had chosen him to be the apostle to Israel, to reach this nation of Jews for Christ. And he tried. He did his level best with his brilliant mind, with his great knowledge of Scripture, with all his Hebrew qualifications -- he lists them for us in Philippians 3 -- a Hebrew of the Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, born of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee of the strictest sect of his religion, zealous according to the Law, blameless in his outer life.

He had it all, and so he started to reach the Jews for Christ. But things kept falling apart on him until it reached such a terrible state that one night the governor, at the instigation of the Jews in Damascus, tried to find him in order that they might seize him and put him to death. On hearing about it, his friends took him out to one of those houses built on the wall of Damascus, and through a window in the dark of the night they let him down in a basket. Paul says, "The night I became 'a basket case', that is the thing I boast about."

Isn't that amazing? Looking back he says, "That was it. As I walked away from the city of Damascus, with all my plans and dreams of glory for Christ collapsed around my feet, that was the night I began to learn a great truth: My natural gifts are not what qualify me as a servant of Christ."

Oh, would that I could teach this to all of Christendom today! We are being bombarded with the philosophy that natural abilities are what make you usable as a Christian -- a strong personality, an outgoing, optimistic outlook, gifts of leadership, handsome frame and body, musical ability, speaking ability -- all these are the things that God will use.

Paul says, "That's a bunch of baloney. I had to learn that did not help, that Christ working in me is the only thing that God approves of." Anybody who is a Christian has that, and if you learn to reckon on Jesus at work within, ready to work through you as you choose to do things, he will work alongside you and make them meaningful and valuable both in God's sight and ultimately man's. That is the great secret that Paul learned. That is why he says, "I look back on that incident on the Damascus wall and I have never forgotten it." He goes on in Philippians 3 to tell us all those things he once counted gain he now counts as nothing but a pile of barnyard manure in contrast to what he has learned Christ can become to him.

I do not know any truth that God wants us to learn that is greater than that. It is the hardest truth we can learn. I talked to a young man just yesterday, 21 years old, a good athlete with a strong body, a very attractive young man, a Christian who loves the Lord and who wants to serve him. But he was struggling between an

opportunity that had been opened to him that would put him in a well-known, fashionable church that would give him a name immediately, that would give him plenty of money, would lead him into a ministry that would very likely have a lot of fame attached to it, or whether he was willing to become obscure and lose himself, trusting God to lead him, and trusting Christ to use him, even though he was never heard of publicly again. That is a struggle we all have to go through in one way or another. Do you remember how Jesus put it? "He that saves his life will lose it. He that loses his life for my sake will save it," {Matt 10:39, 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, 17:33, John 12:25}. That is where Paul was. That is what he said he would boast about, the things that show his weakness because, "when I am weak, then I am strong," {2 Cor 12:10b RSV}. In the next chapter he goes on to demonstrate another illustration of that. We will take that next time we gather for study in this letter.

Paul stresses and underscores this one great truth that made all the difference in his life. If he had never learned that great lesson we would never have heard of him today. He would have been just another flashy figure out of the 1st century who shot up like a rocket on the horizon for a while and then disappeared. Nobody would have heard of him since. Instead he became the mighty apostle who has shaken the world for Christ in every generation for twenty centuries since then because he learned the secret that Jesus taught his own disciples, "without me you can do nothing," {cf, John 15:5b}. That is what we have to learn.

May God help us to learn it.

We are going to close this service with communion, and I am glad we are doing so because communion is designed to teach us this very truth. Many have asked why is there a cup of blood in the communion service. Well, because it looks back to the blood of Christ shed for us on the cross. But what is the meaning of that? It means that our old life has ended. Our old life which is based upon our natural abilities, our natural gifts, our success and our glory in the eyes of others is all over; it is not to be reckoned on any more; God takes no stock of it. But we have a new life symbolized by the bread that we feed on day after day. In the same way that we eat bread so we are to feed on Christ, taking from him his wisdom, his strength, his comfort, his peace, his power. So as we break the bread and drink the cup, let us remember that is the teaching that the Holy Spirit wants to impart to us.

Prayer

Lord, we come to this table that you have given us in order that we might be reminded afresh that there is only one way that we will ever be of use in your kingdom, and that is to come to the end of our natural self, to consent to it and to accept it and to rise again to a new life of trust and confidence in you. Thank you for your faithfulness that you keep sending us reminders of our weakness in order that we might trust your strength. Without those reminders we would all get conceited and boastful and confident that we have what it takes. Help us to be reminded anew by this experience that without the death there can be no resurrection, that nothing that does not die shall ever rise again from the dead. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Title: The Cost of Love
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in Second Corinthians
Scripture: 2 Cor 11:16-33
Message No: 20
Catalog No: 3695
Date: March 30, 1980

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