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Cost and Rewards

2 Corinthians 11:21b-12:10

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

Last week Paul reminded us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light and over the years I have heard lots of definitions of that. But, in the context of 2 Corinthians 11, there's only one meaning Paul could have and that is he's talking about the fact that Satan puts forth a counterfeit religion in order to deceive people away from a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ. It is very clear in the context. He's talking about the servants that he sends out that pretend to be servants of righteousness. He says they are deceitful workers but they disguise themselves as apostles. Clearly in that context, that's what he's referring to. It's the danger of the counterfeit—deceiving people away from a true living dynamic relationship with God—and that raises the question that we talked about last week. How do you know? How do you know the difference between that which is real and that which is counterfeit? Of course the essence would be that it is built on truth and truth as defined by God. You know we don't believe truth is up for grabs. God has defined truth in the Scripture and so, according to the Scripture, what's true. But it's still confusing because a lot of religions still use similar terminology and it starts to sound the same—different definitions but same words—and so you kind of have to process through all of that. So Paul kind of advances the discussion that you can move beyond just the message—although the message is primary—to the messenger. And Paul's going to define a distinction between that which is false and that which is true as it relates to the lifestyle of the messenger.

Now when you hear *messenger,* don't limit that to me. It applies to me but it applies just as much to you. You're just as much the messenger of the truth as I am. So it has to do with whether or not our lifestyles seem to line up with the message we proclaim. That's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with me to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 11. In order to pick up kind of the train of thought—where Paul's going with this—I just want to back up a little bit into verses 20 and 21 and just remind us that Paul said that, as a result of letting the false teachers in, the effect of the false teachers was that they enslaved you, they devoured you, they took advantage of you. They even physically abused you all in the name of exalting themselves.

The essence of religion is it is a self-exalting system. That's the essence; that's the heartbeat; that's the point. The essence of religion is, on the basis of some performance, I can demonstrate that somehow I am better than you and that's what makes me acceptable to God. By definition that is a self-exalting system and, in religion, basically they suck the life out of the majority in order to feed a certain elite religious group who are the *cream of the crop,* the best of performers, and Paul says that's what's happened in Corinth. There's been quite a price. It's with that in mind that he moves into our discussion this morning—that Paul's going to demonstrate that he's very *other than* that.

Verse 21, halfway through:

> **But in whatever respect anyone else is bold (I speak in foolishness), I am just as bold myself. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendents of Abraham? So am I."** (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 21b-22)

A big part of what made the false teachers elite was their heritage. It was their credentials; it was who they were. If we did not know up until now, then we certainly know now that the false teachers are Hebrews. They are Hebrew legalists and it's on the basis of their *Hebrewness* that they are a *cut above*. Paul is, I think, responding to the potential criticism that Paul's mad because he just can't perform. In other words the elite are who they are because of their credentials and because of their performance—and Paul can't compete at their level. Therefore, "It's just sour grapes because he's not in the popular group." And so what Paul is saying is, "Hey, if you want to look at that stuff, then I can line up with every claim that you have." In other words he's putting his credentials forth and saying, "If that's what it is, I can match you line for line." When you go to Philippians 3, Paul actually has a much longer list. It's very similar, but the essence of Philippians 3 is that Paul was the *best of the best*. In other words, if you are talking about people that know how to play the religious game, there was nobody better when he was in his prime. So he's saying, "Hey, if that's the deal, I'm as good as anybody." But he's going to shift gears to ask the question and that becomes really the heartbeat of the discussion. He says, "Are they servants—slaves maybe a better term—of Christ? Okay here are the credentials and all this stuff, but here's the question—this is the great divide—**Are they slaves of Christ**?" That launches them into his discussion.

> **Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?"** (vs. 23-29)

Paul lists out this resume of what it has cost him to be faithful—to obey his call. Now think of the contrast between those religious teachers who were willing to use the Corinthians to take advantage of them—to abuse them, to exalt themselves—contrasted with the cost Paul was willing to pay—to die to himself in order to bring them the message of hope. This list is staggering. We think we're suffering if somebody at work makes fun of us. But this list is staggering in terms of its level of intensity and abuse. The cost has been significant to be faithful to his call.

Now when we read through this list we see it as courageous. If Paul lived in our culture he probably would write an autobiography and then he'd travel the circuit telling the story and there would be standing applause everywhere he goes—standing ovations. But you have to understand his words up against first century Roman culture. They did not see it that way. They prided themselves on the ability to be elite, on the ability to strive and to succeed and to *be somebody*. Your performance and your credentials were everything. This would have been embarrassing. This would have been shameful. This would have been the life of a loser. This would have reflected someone the gods were angry with. This would have reflected someone that's infectious: "Stay away from him; something's desperately wrong." They would not have viewed this as virtuous in any way.

So what is Paul doing? It's very similar to what he did in Chapter 2. As a matter of fact I would say Chapters 2 and 11 and 12 are kind of bookends for this whole thing. In Chapter 2 he again was

talking about the schemes of Satan, which moved him into a discussion about a very difficult time in his own ministry, where he struggled and he failed. He was so concerned about the fact that Titus wasn't back yet—that God had given him an open door to ministry—and he couldn't even go through the door. In essence he put his tail between his legs and went home. It was not a good time in Paul's ministry. Why did Paul tell that story? It was in contrast to the performance-based boasting of the false teachers. And rather than Paul trying to list out his accomplishments to say, "I'm just as good as they are," he went the polar opposite direction to say, "Hey let me boast a little bit about my failures and my struggles and the times that I've blown it" —as a way of saying that he's totally *other than* the culture, that what defines him is totally different than what the Roman culture understood. In Chapter 2, right after Paul had that discussion about his struggles and failures, he launched into this very graphic imagery of a Roman Triumphal Entry. That image is very graphic. It presents Christ as the conquering general followed by His slaves whom He has conquered. Paul has presented the picture that the only one worthy of applause is Christ. The rest of us are just slaves who He has conquered through His grace and love. It is a very graphic picture—very similar to what he's doing here: "Okay if you want me to boast a little bit, let me tell you about all the ways I've suffered and all the ways I've struggled and all the challenges and failures." So he lists out his resume in a way that the Romans would have understood to be very, very unimpressive.

Verse 30:

> **If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weaknesses. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands**. (Vs.30-33)

Now one of the interesting questions coming out of that paragraph is, "What's the big deal?" —after the previous paragraph where he listed being beaten and stoned and thrown to prison and left for dead and shipwrecked. That's a dramatic list. So what's the big deal about being lowered in a basket in the middle of the night and fleeing for his life? I think the only way to understand this paragraph is to understand again the backdrop of Roman culture. They had what was called a *crown of the wall*. The crown of the wall was a literal crown that basically looked like a city wall. As a matter of fact archeologists have dug up a marble statue of the goddess Tyche which actually came from Corinth and she was wearing a *crown of the wall*. So we have some sense of exactly what it looked like. The crown of the wall was very important. If you wore one, everyone knew why you had it. The essence of it was this: The ancient cities were surrounded by walls, so if the enemy attacked, you could close the gates and you could hunker down and often you could ride it out. You had enough food and water where you could ride it out for two or three months and a visiting enemy certainly couldn't bring that much stuff and they would eventually give up and go home. So that was the strategy. So the enemy had to figure out ways to get in and they had a variety of ways of doing that. They would use battering rams and try to go through the gates. But one of the most common strategies was to attack with ladders. On multiple fronts they would charge the wall with ladders. They would throw the ladders up against the wall and up they would go. But it was obviously very dangerous. Most of those that carried ladders and started up the ladders died because they were easy to pick off with arrows and spears and by pushing the ladders back or they would pour hot liquid on them—so it was almost always a death sentence. But eventually someone would make it. They would penetrate and they would get over the line which would cause absolute chaos and then everything would break open. The *crown of the wall* was

awarded to the first one over the wall. In almost every case it was given posthumously because they almost always died. But once in a while someone would survive and to wear that crown was a really big deal. But it still raises the question, "How does anyone know you were the first one over the wall?" Whoever made that claim would have to appear before the emperor and would give an oath before the Roman gods and before the emperor that, "In the name of these gods I am not lying."

It's almost the exact language of Paul in this text. Paul is in essence telling his own wall story. When he says that **...The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.** That's almost identical to the oath language. But in typical fashion Paul—and maybe somewhat sarcastically—is saying, "Okay, let me tell you my great wall story: That when the going got tough and it looked like they were going to get me, somebody lowered me in a basket in the middle of the night and I fled for my life." It would be the polar opposite of what they would have considered courageous and virtuous. Again Paul is, in a sarcastic fashion, saying, "Okay this is my great accomplishment. This is my great wall story. This is my *crown of the wall*. When the going got tough in the middle of the night, they lowered me in a basket and I *got out of Dodge fast."*

In essence again what he is saying is, "I'm not going to try to match you performance for performance." Paul even says at the beginning of that paragraph, **If I'm going to boast, I'm going to boast about my weakness**...because, at the end of the day, what gives me value is a totally different system and he refused to play the game of the Roman culture.

Now I suppose it was possible for his critics to say, "You know this guy's just a loser. You know the gods are obviously angry with him. He's just a loser and what kind of a nutty religion is this anyway?" So I think the first part of Chapter 12 is Paul coming back and saying, "I want to tell you something. I'm not a loser and this is the reward of those who trust God by faith." He's going to tell them a story that he has not told anyone for fourteen years.

> **"Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast; except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than what he sees in me or hears from me."** (2 Corinthians 12:1-6)

Literally what Paul is saying is fourteen years ago, before the previous paragraphs, before the stonings, before the shipwreck, before the beatings, before any of that, God took him to heaven and gave him a bit of a glimpse of the reward to come, so that he would know the cost is worth it. The conversation was something like this: "*Paul, I'm going to invite you to forfeit the applause of this world in order to die to yourself, in order to fulfill your calling, but I want to give you a glimpse of what's to come so that you will know that the reward is ultimately worth it."*

Now Paul is *the man*! I think in this paragraph he's still just unwilling and unable to pepper the paragraph with "I", "I", "I", "I", "I". So he speaks of himself in third person—just to diffuse that

and mute that a little bit. But he's *the man*! And whether it is bodily or non-bodily he says, "I don't know. All I know is that I heard and saw unimaginable things."

The idea of a **...third heaven** and **...Paradise** is really Jewish. They had interesting understandings of all this. Probably the simplest way to understand it is they believed that the Garden of Eden was Paradise. As a matter of fact a Persian word for Eden and garden is the same word and it kind of reflects that thought. When centered into the picture, the Jews believed then that the Garden—Paradise—was moved to heaven and then one day the New Heaven and Earth comes back to earth as God always intended it. I think theologically they are correct. You remember when Jesus hung on the cross with the thief on the cross he said, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." It would certainly reflect that same thinking. What Paul is saying is that God took him on a little tour of what is to come in order to understand the eternal reward, in order to process the cost. Paul basically says, "I am not allowed to talk about it." You know he couldn't come back and write a book or go on television; he wasn't supposed to talk about it; it was for him. He says, "If I did talk about it, it would be spectacular and I'd be telling the truth." But he also quickly says, "But I don't want you to think that I'm special. I don't want you to think that I'm elite so I'm just telling you this is what happened."

Verse 7:

> **Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."** (Vs. 7-9a)

Now without question Paul says, "Because of this..." and the danger that he's going to come back, having seen what he's seen and say, "Whoa, I'm somebody." That, because of the danger of that, God sent a messenger from Satan. Now it doesn't say, "God sent..." but it clearly said, "This is for Paul's good." So clearly it's from God and not the enemy— **A thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan.**

Now there's been a lot of discussion about what is meant by **...a thorn in the flesh**...what is meant by the **...messenger of Satan**. Some people think it was something physical like maybe Paul's eyesight. Other people think that maybe it's a demonic spirit. So in the idea of "my two cents worth," this is what I think it is. I think again these things always have to be interpreted within the context. This was a public letter. It was read publically to the congregation. So if you go back and look at the discussion in Chapter 11—where he refers to Satan—he refers to Satan as **...an angel of light**. He refers to Satan as **...sending messengers...false teachers...deceitful workers.** From that point— to where he brings it up again—if you're reading the letter, is about sixty seconds. In light of that, how could the people understand that in any other light than what he just said sixty seconds before? Therefore the messengers of Satan, therefore the thorn in the flesh, were the religious, legalistic teachers that dogged Paul every step of the way of his public ministry. Read the Book of Acts. There was a contingent of Jewish legalists that followed Paul everywhere he went— every moment of his public ministry—and they made his life miserable. As a matter of fact, you look at that paragraph with all he's gone through. Much of that was caused by these Jewish legalists. You look at what is to follow and he goes back to things that these Jewish legalists have caused— that have caused him discomfort and pain. So I think, in the context, what is meant by that thorn in the flesh is the fact that these false teachers, these Jewish legalists, followed Paul everywhere he went

and made his life miserable. So three times he says, "God, really could you get rid of these guys?" And three times God said, "No, **...my grace will be sufficient for My power is perfected in weakness."**

What we cannot miss is how much this matters to God. This idea of brokenness and humility—of breaking away from a performance-based value system—is so important to God that in order to keep Paul from exalting himself—and it says it twice in that paragraph—that he sent this messenger of Satan in order that Paul wouldn't lose his way and continue to be dependent upon Christ.

> **Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties,** [that's all been brought on by the false teachers] **for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."** (Vs. 9b-10)

I think what he is saying there is, "When I recognize that I am weak, it's then that I become strong through the power of Jesus. But as long as I think I am strong, I have doomed myself to be weak." I think that's what he's saying.

Corinthians was a Roman colony. As a Roman colony they had all the rights and privileges of a Roman citizen. But in many of these Roman colonies, and Corinth was no exception, they were actually more Roman than the mother city herself. In other words, in order to demonstrate they were worthy of being a Roman citizen, they would take whatever was true in Rome and they would ratchet it up another notch. That is definitely true of Corinth. It was a big deal in the Roman culture to be successful, to perform, to list your heritage, to list your credentials. As a matter of fact it would be very common to say, "Hello I am Bryan Clark. This is my education; these are my credentials; this is my lineage; this is all the things that I have accomplished; this is my public office." That's part of how you'd introduce yourself if you were numbered among the elite. The longer the list, the more elite you were. It's within the context of that culture that Paul presents a totally contrary resume. He puts forth a resume that says, "I am radically out of step with that culture. I am completely *other than*. Here's my resume: Here's a list of my struggles, of my despair, of my failures, of my difficulties and under the category of qualifications there's one word—grace. Grace!"

Paul clearly was delivering the message that he brings nothing to the table. It's not his talent; it's not his credentials; it's not his education; it's not his experience. What he brings to the table is brokenness and a recognition that it's only when I am weak that, through the power of Jesus, I am strong.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the great German pastor that was ultimately executed under Hitler, who once said, "When God bids a man, he bids him come and die." He's right. The ultimate cost to being a Christ follower is not persecution; it is not imprisonment; it is not being beaten; it is not even being martyred for the faith. The ultimate cost to being a Christ follower is *to die to self*. That is the ultimate cost. The essence of religion is taking a performance-based value system and somehow just trying to mix God into it—to justify a self-exalting system that is ultimately set up to exalt a handful of people. The problem is that the religious cultural, performance-based value system has drifted into the church, which is why the Christian church is filled with arrogance and pride—which is totally contrary to a message of grace. The essence of grace is: I bring nothing to the table but my brokenness...but my weakness...and I only have one qualification for ministry and that is grace. "Only when I'm weak am I strong."

This has been a major theme through 1 Corinthians, through 2 Corinthians. Next week is the last week in 2 Corinthians but this is really the culminating week on this theme. We have been pounding this message for two years—to understand that we are a broken people and there is no place for pride and arrogance in an economy of grace. I feel like, having pounded this message for two years, kind of at the end of this journey, we need to *do* something and not just walk away. We don't do this very often but I really feel like we need to at least give ourselves the opportunity to do it this morning. If you are visiting with us or you are starting to get uncomfortable, don't worry about it. No one is going to embarrass you. You can sit in your seat—no problem. But I am going to say this: I want to give us the opportunity to respond if we want to respond. I feel like for me personally, I want to respond in some way that is physical, something more than just saying, "Yeah, that's good". I feel, for me, an appropriate response is to kneel and to bow physically before the feet of Jesus as my way of acknowledging, "You're the only one worthy of applause and I want to be nothing more than your slave. I want to say 'No' to the temporary applause of this world—to live for the things that matter."

I would say to you: I am as vulnerable to a performance-based lifestyle as anyone and I am as capable of being filled with arrogance and pride as anyone. But I don't want to live that way. I don't want that. I don't want that to be what defines my life. I want to live consistent with grace, which is a message of brokenness and humility, to live where He alone gets the applause. And I feel like, for me, I want to bow and surrender as my way of saying, "That's my heart". And I don't want to do that in private. I want to do it in front of God and I want to do it in front of you. In just a moment I'm going to pray and I'm going to invite the worship team back up and they are going to sing really a call to commitment. And I'm going to bow here in the front as my pledge that that's what I want—that's my heart. If you would like to come up and join me, I invite you to do so. If you'd like to just kneel or bow at your seat, you are free to do it...or to step out in the aisle. If you think there's something else that, to you, really represents the decision of your heart, I just want you to feel the freedom to do that. I just think every now and then we have to respond and say, "Yeah, that's what I want." And so let me pray and then we'll have the team come and you respond as you feel is appropriate.

Father, we are thankful that You love us, that You sent Your Son Jesus to be the conquering general, to give His life to conquer sin and death, that in the triumphal entry parade there's only One worth of applause—followed by slaves. Lord, I think our heart this morning is to be a people characterized by brokenness and humility, to be totally other than a performance-based culture, to give up the applause of the moment, to live for that which matters forever. Lord, I pray that we would be willing to abandon it all for the sake of this call. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Cost and Rewards

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards
2 Corinthians 11:21b-12:11
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What does it mean for you to find someone you "trust?" Whether it's a doctor, lawyer, school teacher, counselor, car salesman, insurance salesman or any other person. What is the basis for that trust?

2. What should be the basis for trusting someone with your spiritual life? How do you go about separating out those whom you can trust and those you can't? Can you disagree with someone on some issues and still trust that person? Why or why not?

3. If you could summarize the difference between religion and a relationship with Christ in one word, what word would you use? Explain.

Bible Study

1. Read 2 Corinthians 11:21b-33. Do a quick review of 11:1-21a just to gather the train of thought into 11:21b-33. Compare Paul's words in 11:21b-22 with Philippians 3:2-11. What is Paul's point in both texts?

2. How does Paul contrast his life as a Christ-follower with the lifestyle of the false teachers summarized in 11:20,21? Contrast Paul's message with the Prosperity Gospel of today?

3. What is Paul's point in reviewing the "basket" story in 11:30-33? What was the "Crown of the Wall" that Bryan talked about?

4. Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. Why do you believe Paul was allowed to get a glimpse of paradise?

5. What was the purpose of the "thorn" in the flesh? What is Paul really saying in practical terms?

6. The greatest danger in God using us to do something special is what? How might God work to prevent that in us? What can we count on according to 12:9?

7. Summarize 12:10. In everyday practical terms, what does Paul mean? In what way am I strong when I am weak?

Application

1. What is the essential difference between Paul and the false teachers? What is the real cost of following Christ and living in the reality of grace? What does this mean for how you live and think on a daily basis?

2. To really be a Christ-follower, what is the cost and what is the reward?

3. What will be the greatest barrier to living as a true Christ follower for you personally? What will you need to do to deal with that barrier?

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