

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church
 August 14, 2022
 Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Credentials of Authenticity

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 10-13)

Bragging Rights

(2 Corinthians 11:1-33)

Study #2

Introduction: Knowing the score...

Sports spectating isn't as easy as you might think it would be. A certain level of sophistication is required to intelligently follow sports.

If you like watching track meets (I do), you need to know whether the event winners are judged on distance (javelin; shot put), height (high jump; pole vault), or time (running events).

Confuse these and you'll end up calling the wrong winners. The same holds true for other sports.

- Weightlifting events are judged by pounds lifted, not time under the bar.
- Basketball games are won by the team that scored the most points, not the team with the most blocks.
- Golf tournaments are won by the golfer with the fewest, not the most, strokes.

If you misunderstand the scoring system wrong, you'll wrongly conclude that the loser is the winner.

If you are competing for the prize in a certain sport, you must know the scoring system, or you could end up losing by being first to the wrong goal.

This is all obvious, of course. And, of course, we haven't come to this time to think about games.

We are here to learn about taking next steps with Jesus.

So...how do we know if we're on the right track when it comes to living as a faithful disciple? What is the scoring system?

There are lots of opinions out there as to how we can know if we are successfully running the race of following Jesus. There have always been different opinions, dating back to the first century.

This morning, we'll listen to the wisdom of the Apostle Paul, who knew the score when it came to assessing faithfulness, success, and discipleship authenticity.

Review...

Last Sunday (2 Corinthians 10) Paul told us about weapons we are to use against our unseen enemy.

To engage in spiritual warfare, we use non-fleshy weapons. We *love*,¹ we *stay on mission for Jesus*, and we *live for God's "Well done!"*

We do all of this to successfully wage war against Satan. We are to do this, without regard to what anyone else is doing.

Paul was quick to condemn the practice of comparing ourselves to others. "*Am I doing better or worse than this brother or sister at following Jesus?*" No. We simply follow.

The practice of comparing was common in the early church of Corinth - and it's sadly common today, too. So, Paul warns us against the comparison trap.

Then, in what we will see today, he enters into what he calls "foolishness" and compares himself to those in Corinth who were claiming that they were apostles and that he (Paul) was not.

¹ We adapt our style of relating to best meet the needs of the person we are with.

Paul is going to claim bragging rights to be the genuine article, the true apostle and the authentic disciple - and he knows it's foolish to do so even while he's doing it.

But he's going to do it anyway.

This morning, we get a real treat as Paul gets autobiographical. We learn more about Paul's life here than we do in any other collection of verses in the New Testament.

He talks about himself. And it isn't as if he wanted to talk about himself. In fact, he wouldn't have if he didn't feel forced to do so.

But there were those who had opposed him and his crystal clear, grace-based Gospel in Corinth. And he knew that the time had come to set the record straight, even if he had to do so by the foolishness of boasting.

In the first half of 2 Corinthians 11, Paul sets the stage for the "foolishness" to come.

Preview... (2 Corinthians 11:1-15)

He begins by expressing - as he has already done - how much he loved the Corinthians. He was the one who brought the message of the Gospel to them, and he was crazy about them, jealous for their welfare. (v. 2)

But he's fearful for them. Now that they are saved, he fears that they might be deceived - just like Eve was deceived in the Garden of Eden - and led astray from pure and sincere devotion to Christ. (v. 3)

He even poked fun at them for tolerating false doctrine and for not clinging to the truth that he had taught them. (vv. 4-6)

Paul reminded his friends in Corinth about how he had served them sacrificially. He accepted money given by other churches in

Macedonia for support so that he could provide the Corinthians with his apostolic ministry free of charge. (vv. 7-9)

He even goes on to say that he's going to keep on doing this to prove his genuine apostleship against those who claim to be true apostles, but aren't.

He knows that those guys won't follow his example, because they're in the ministry for what they can get out of it. (vv. 10-13)

And then, he links these "**false apostles**" to Satan, who, just like these guys do, also disguises himself as an angel of light. (vv. 14-15)

And with that, Paul begins his boast.

Fighting Fire with Fire (vv. 16-21)

Paul's Hesitation (vv. 16-17)

[16] Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little. [17] What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would,² but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting.

Jesus is our example in everything, and He didn't boast. From beginning to end, the Bible refers to boasting as foolishness throughout.³

So, Paul is on safe ground when he says that what he is about to do - boast - is foolish.

But here, he determines that it's wisdom to engage in a little foolish boasting.

The reason is that the Corinthians themselves were such suckers for foolishness.

Sarcastic "commendation" (vv. 18-20)

² This comment does not impact the inspiration of this passage. Paul is not saying, "*What I am now saying is not inspired by the Lord.*"

³ For Scripture's perspective on boasting, see 1 Samuel 2:3; Psalm 10:3; Proverbs 25:14; Romans 3:27; 15:17; 1 Cor. 3:21; 1 Cor. 5:6; James 3:5; 4:16.

[18] Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. [19] For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. [20] For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, if anyone devours you, if anyone takes advantage of you, if anyone exalts himself, if anyone hits you in the face.

Now, it's possible that Paul meant these phrases (especially this last one about being hit in the face) in a figurative, hyperbolic sense.

Maybe...I personally think that he could very easily be describing exactly what was happening in Corinth.⁴

It is easy for me to imagine that those who opposed Paul in Corinth lorded it over the flock by an ugly abuse of authority.

If that is what happened, the Corinthians were not the last Christians to allow themselves to be abused by leaders.⁵

Heavy-handed authoritarian leadership has marred the church of Jesus through the ages. You may have experienced it yourself. I pray to God that this is never anyone's experience here at Northwest.

You know, leaders who are control-freaky. Yelling or screaming at people from the pulpit. Pressure to give or to serve.

Wherever such anti-grace styles of leadership appear, it is ugly and destructive. That is, evidently, what was happening in Corinth.

So, even though boasting was not the best way for an apostle to get across his point, Paul says that he is going to make an exception - and BOAST - to put the false apostles in their places.

A Boasting Strategy (v. 21)

⁴ In another place (1 Timothy 3) Paul felt it necessary to require that if a man had a reputation as a "striker" he should not be considered for the office of Elder. And what does this say but that churches might have been tempted to recognize a man as an Elder who did have a reputation as a striker?

⁵ In the 1970's Jim Jones started in ministry a bubble off plumb as a pastor of The People's Temple in California. Then he became increasingly authoritarian. Then

[21] To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison. But in whatever respect anyone else is bold - I speak in foolishness - I too am bold.

A willingness to boast

The opposition has been stronger than Paul has been - as measured by tyranny, greed, arrogance, and violence. Paul has been a weakling, an abject failure in all these things.

But he will be weak no more. He is going to boast about himself and his exploits so as to protect his friends in Corinth from abuse.

Ministry training 101

So, think with me for a minute about what Paul was doing. He engaged in boasting, even though boasting is usually frowned upon.

He never sinned by what he did, but he did act in a way that he would not normally have to respond to a complex, un-ideal, situation.

I think that his behavior here invites us to admit to some "grey" in life, to see the need for godly creativity when considering how to respond to complex situations.

Some of us might be tempted to look at what Paul has done and tell him, "*Nope, Paul, you should have never dropped to the level of those fools in Corinth and boasted.*"

We might even point to Proverbs 26:4 which says, **[26:4] Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness, Or you will also be like him.**

But then, if we kept on reading in Proverbs we'd come to the very next verse, which tells us.

dictatorial. He ended up taking his whole church to Georgetown, Guyana, South America, settled down deep in the jungle (he called the site "Jonestown") and eventually led the entire group of over seven hundred men, women, and children in a mass murder/suicide bloodbath in 1978. I traveled to Guyana in the 1980's to teach at a Bible School there and saw the long-lasting devastating impact of that man's abuse everywhere in the Christian community in Guyana.

[26:5] Answer a fool as his foolishness deserves, So that he will not be wise in his own eyes.

So, do you answer a fool according to his folly - or not? Wisdom says, "It depends..."

Wisdom opens us up to the possibility of using different means to address different scenarios. But wisdom doesn't lead us to moral relativity.

We are simply saying that there will be times when we will have to recognize nuance. We will need to choose a course of action when there is not an obvious "right" or "wrong" path.

We'll see, in what follows, that by choosing foolishness, Paul proves himself to be the genuine apostle while revealing the false apostles in Corinth for the phonies they were.

He starts off his boast with a run-down of his physical and spiritual pedigree.

Paul's Credentials as a Faithful Apostle / Disciple (vv. 22-29)

A True-Blue Jew - and so what... (v. 22)

[22] Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

It may seem that Paul is simply claiming to be a Jew three times, but there is more than that going on here.

- **Racially**, he was a member of an ancient near eastern tribe that grew to prominence during the days of Moses: the Hebrews. (1500 BC)
- **Socially**, he was descended from Jacob. (1800 BC)
- **Spiritually**, he was descended from seed of Abraham, the father of the faithful. (2000 BC)

⁶ In Philippians 3, Paul compared his pedigrees to barnyard manure in comparison to knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection. As he lists his ancestors here in 2 Corinthians, there is a rising crescendo as to what was his greatest boast.

Was the opposition in Corinth claiming that Paul was not a full-blooded member of God's chosen people? Maybe. If so, here he pulled out his pedigree papers and proved them wrong.⁶

This being his least important boast, Paul goes on to give us a window into the things he has experienced in his service for Jesus.

And I'm betting that no one who opposed Paul in Corinth wanted to compare himself to Paul after reading what we are about to read.

Right off the bat he lists persecutions.

Suffered for Christ (vv. 23-27)

Physical persecutions (vv. 23-25)

Imprisonments (v. 23a)

[23] Are they servants of Christ? - I am speaking as if insane - I more so; in far more labors,⁷ in far more imprisonments

The book of Acts tells of the night Paul and Silas spent a night in jail in Philippi (Acts 16). We also discover that he was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23) and at Rome (Acts 28).

But at least one ancient church historian (Clement) says that Paul was imprisoned seven times.

Imagine that. Jailed for varying amounts of time, for Jesus, on seven separate occasions.

And Paul was beaten. Oh, how he was beaten.

Beatings (vv. 23b-25)

⁷ Paul is not conceding that the false teachers are truly "servants of Christ." Rather, that by cataloguing his own credentials, he will show them to NOT be servants of Christ.

[23b]...beaten times without number, often in danger of death. [24] Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. [25] Three times I was beaten with rods

First, he mentions Jewish beatings, the infamous “40 lashes less one.”

The Law of Moses prescribed for certain offenses a public whipping of forty lashes.⁸ But it also required that if more than forty lashes were inflicted, then the man who did the whipping had to himself receive forty lashes.

So “the whipper” was VERY careful to not beat “the whipped” over forty times. The standard Jewish beating thus became “40 less one” (to protect against poor counting).

And Paul endured this beating from his fellow countrymen five times.

He was also beaten, though, by Gentiles, who had no scruples about any forty-lash limit. They beat people until the whipper grew tired of beating.

This was such a degrading punishment that Roman citizens were exempted from being beaten with rods.

Paul, being a Roman citizen⁹ should have been exempted. But unruly mobs and weak judges paved the way for Paul, the Roman, to be beaten with rods three times.

Stonings (v. 25b)

[25b]...once I was stoned

We know about this one. Paul was pelted with rocks by an angry mob with such violence that he was left for dead outside the city limits of Lystra (Acts 14).

Then there were the high seas adventures.

Seafaring disasters (v. 25c)

[25c]...three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent adrift at sea.¹⁰

The book of Acts tells us that Paul often traveled by ship on the Mediterranean Sea. A total of nine seafaring trips are recorded in Acts. Of course, there may have been more.

As you would guess, none of these voyages were luxury cruise line affairs.

On three of those journeys, he was shipwrecked.¹¹

During one of those mishaps, he endured what I would consider the ultimate nightmare.

I can’t even imagine the horror of spending a day and a night either treading water or hanging on to floating debris to not drown before deliverance came.

Paul then summarizes the persecution side of his apostolic ministry.

Everywhere he has turned, everywhere he has gone, and in everything he has done he has encountered serious, life-threatening danger.

⁸ Deuteronomy 25:3, “*He may beat him forty times but no more, lest he beat him with many more stripes than these, and your brother be degraded in your eyes.*” Such flogging was done by the Jewish authorities to scholars who were deserving of the synagogue ban, consorting with Gentiles, or who ate forbidden food.

⁹ There is one instance where Paul was *almost* beaten with rods. (Acts 22:22ff)

¹⁰ In this listing are many events that are not recorded in Acts. But we should remember that Acts is not an exhaustive history of Paul’s life, but a selective history of God’s work in establishing and expanding Jesus’ church.

¹¹ None of those can refer to the shipwreck recorded in Acts 27, because it hadn’t happened as of the writing of 2 Corinthians.

Dangers at every turn (v. 26)

[26] 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 brothers¹²

He really suffered. He really was threatened.

By legal process and by mob violence, his own people, the Jews, as well as Gentiles worked to end Paul's work by ending Paul's life.

And he's not done.

He continues, mentioning some suffering he endured "just on account of because." His thought here is that that these sorts of things may often simply come our way as we serve Jesus.

Comes with the territory (v. 27)

[27] I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Moms and dads identify with sleeplessness. But Paul accepted sleepless nights to stay up late and talk, or to get up early to pray.

And he mentions hunger. People are sometimes hungry because they simply don't have the funds to buy enough food for themselves or for their family - and that was sometimes Paul's lot.

But sometimes people are hungry because they don't have time to eat and are too wrapped up in what they are doing to grab a bite. That, too, was a part of Paul's story.

¹² It's not necessary that we identify specific situations that would correspond to every "danger" listed here. It is enough to recognize that his day-to-day experience in serving Christ was no picnic.

And sometimes people are hungry because they choose to not eat as when they are purposefully fasting.

Whatever the case, Paul was committed to serving Jesus and serving people for Jesus, and that led to unavoidable hardships - physical hunger,¹³ being exposed to the elements, working hard.

And there is more.

Filled With Love (vv. 28-29)

[28] Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. [29] Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

This is Paul's boast of love.¹⁴

I think that one of the most impressive aspects of Paul's life is that he cared so deeply for people who often didn't care for him at all.

It is relatively easy to care for people who love you and who appreciate you.

It is a whole lot easier to NOT care for someone who does NOT care for you. But Paul kept caring for those who couldn't have cared less for him. I find that Jesus-imitating kind of love soul-stirring.

So, to summarize, the Apostle Paul:

- allowed himself to be hurt by people over and over again because he refused to stop spreading the GOOD NEWS that Jesus saves.
- kept on exposing himself to physical suffering because of a dogged determination to serve the Lord.

¹³ C.K Barrett thinks that "*without food*" must refer to voluntary fastings. It could refer to deprivations Paul endured because of his decision to serve the Corinthians free of charge.

¹⁴ What he had told us earlier in this letter was true - *[2 Corinthians 5:14] the love of Christ controls [him].*

- was continually wracked with emotional pain over the failures and the problems of God's people.¹⁵

He began this whole autobiography by telling us that he was going to boast. These are his boasts.

His boasting claim to be a genuine apostle and an authentic disciple consisted of pointing to his heritage (but not much!), his willingness to suffer, and his love.

So, when you and I see someone who doesn't put a lot of stock in their standing in life (they don't care much where they are in anyone's pecking order) AND who is also willing to suffer for Christ AND who loves, we can know that we have found the genuine article.

These are traits of the Christian who is living authentically.

So, Paul has gotten down to the level of the Corinthians and has boasted.

But he was hesitant to boast. He knew it was something he had to do. But he was super uncomfortable doing it.

Well, all of that is about to change. That's because in the final verses of this chapter Paul lets loose and really brags.

In this last paragraph, he tells us about something that happened to him about twenty years earlier.

It is THIS one incident he wants to draw attention to more than anything else. To get to that incident, we need to backtrack to the book of Acts, chapter 9.

One Boast-worthy Moment! (Acts 9; 2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

LIFE Begins in Damascus (Acts 9:1-19)

There, we find Paul (then known as Saul) on his way to the city of Damascus. He and some Jewish friends were looking for Christians to drag back to Jerusalem for trial - to either imprison or kill.

As they neared Damascus, though, both Paul's trip and his life were interrupted by Jesus.

A light from heaven flashed around him. A Voice spoke to him, **[4] "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"**

When Paul asked how it was that he could have been guilty of persecuting God, the Lord responded, **[5] "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."**

In an instant, Paul saw that in his opposition to Christianity, he had been attacking God.

He had chosen the wrong enemy and had leaned his ladder against the wrong wall. His efforts to stamp out the Christian Way were **PERFECTLY** wrong.

And the instant Paul recognized the Voice as the voice of Jesus, everything came into focus, he was wonderfully converted and became a follower of Jesus. He never looked back.¹⁶

Accepted, then Persecuted in Damascus (Acts 9:19-23)

Once inside Damascus, having been led there by his friends, a Christian named Ananias laid hands on him, the Lord restored his sight, and Saul the Persecutor became Paul the Preacher.

believing in Jesus, he went to the region of Arabia (Galatians 1:17, close to Damascus, located directly to the east of the city), probably for spiritual reflection and meditation on the Old Testament in light of his newfound faith in Jesus. It was there that Jesus may well have personally appeared to Him.

¹⁵ Jesus said it best, (paraphrased) "*When the wolf comes, the hireling runs away but the true shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep.*" (John 10)

¹⁶ It is impossible to piece together the life of Saul during these early days without going to other New Testament passages where his story is filled out with details left out of Acts. Specifically, in Galatians (1:15-24) Paul tells us that soon after

Persecuted in Damascus (Acts 9:23)

Paul's encyclopedic knowledge of the Scriptures proved too much for anyone who tried to contend with him. He had an irrefutable arsenal of arguments to show that Jesus really was the Promised Messiah.

But opposition soon rose up against Paul.

[23] When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him [24] but their plot became known to Saul. They were also closely watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death

Paul was so unanswerable, and the Jews were so helpless in debate that they saw no recourse but to resort to violence, and the persecutor turned preacher now became the persecuted.

The opposition blockaded the city so that Paul was hemmed in with no escape through the city's gates. Damascus became a prison, guaranteed to lead to Paul's capture and to his execution.

And the plan would have worked, too, except for action taken on behalf of Paul by his new friends, the **CHRISTIANS** in Damascus.

All of that is enough background for us to make our way back to 2 Corinthians and listen to Paul's final boast.

Rescued in Damascus (Acts 9:24-25; 2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

[2 Corinthians 11:30] If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. [31] The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.

[32] In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, [33] and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall,¹⁷ and so escaped his hands.¹⁸

Telling this story of an event nearly twenty years in the past makes it look almost like an afterthought, "Oh, and I almost forgot about the time I was rescued in Damascus..."

This is not an afterthought. This event was crucial to shaping Paul into the man he became.

When Paul launched his life as a Christian apostle, he was convinced of two things.

- One, Jesus was the long-promised, Jewish Messiah, the Savior of the world.
- Two, with his intellect, training, and knowledge, he was the best qualified person around to effectively reach his fellow Jews for Jesus.

But, as he climbed out of that basket on the outside of the Damascus city wall, sore and cramped, he had started to learn a great truth: His strengths were not what qualified him for success in serving Jesus.¹⁹

His brief, post-conversion time in Damascus established him as a tower of strength and as a powerful preacher. He exited under cover of night after having hung off the city walls in a fish-basket.

Paul's breakthrough moment came when he saw that he was a "basket case."

¹⁷ The walls around ancient cities were often wide enough to drive a chariot around on top, and such was probably the case in Damascus. The walls, in fact (just like the lower walls of some of the Catholic Missions near downtown San Antonio) actually housed people. Homes were built into the walls.

¹⁸ There is a marked difference in the atmosphere between Acts 9's telling of the story and here in 2 Corinthians. There, Luke shows that God will always see His

people through their trials as Paul triumphantly thwarted the plot of the Jews. Here, the emphasis is on the humiliation and weakness to which Paul is exposed.

¹⁹ Significantly, the next time we read of Paul's activity was when he became involved in the ministry at Antioch - by invitation from Barnabas.

He related his basket experience as his boast because it was in the basket that he finally began to see things clearly. His weakness paved the way for the display of God's strength.²⁰

This is where Paul began to understand "the discipleship scoring system."

Conclusion:

Remember at the beginning I made the point that in all sports, we have to know the scoring system to know who has won or lost a game.

What if this week, the NCAA and the NFL announce that beginning this season, the winner of a football game will not be the team that scores the most points? The winner will be the team that has the most interceptions at the end of the game.

Or, what if the NBA changes the scoring system so that the winner is the team with the most blocked shots? Or, what if the rules of a track meet change so that the winner of the 100 meter sprint is not the fastest, but the runner who takes the least steps to cover 100 meters?

Changing the scoring system will change the way competitors plan for games, train for games, and play on game day. Everybody plays for the win.

So, if winning as a disciple of Jesus is judged by our encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible and debating skills + authoritative leadership + getting people to do what we tell them to do + personal charisma, well, we'll train for that. We'll live to do all of that.

The Apostle Paul says here that the scoring system for the disciple of Jesus is quite different.

It requires that I:
Admit that I am a basket case and must depend on God's strength, not my own.
Stop caring about status.
Willingly suffer for Jesus
Love.

That's the discipleship scoring system. That's winning in Jesus.

²⁰ The Lord Jesus blessed a human recognition of weakness at the very beginning of His own ministry when He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "***Blessed are the poor in spirit***" (Matthew 5).