

Following last week's sermon, a few people contacted me and thanked me for the message. And for some folk, I think it struck a chord, and it helped them to recognise what idolatry is (and that it's in our churches today), – the temptation to worship a false image of God (or a Jesus of our own making) .... So, thanks for that feedback...

But I am going to say, "As a Bible teacher, I'm feeling like I'm ready to move on from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians", and we're nearly finished, so that's going to happen soon...

But the reason I want to move on, is I feel like nearly every week, the reading has been about false teachers:

- their attraction;
- their seduction;
- popularity,,,,, and
- the chaos and the destruction that they can cause within a church...
- and yet the readiness in which they are received.

It just keeps on coming... And I don't want to sound like a cracked record...

*Now (as I wrote this), it dawned on me, that anyone under 40 probably has no idea what a cracked record is... Let me explain....*

*A record, is just like an ancient version of an album from iTunes, and a record player, is just like a pre-historic smartphone, but they're nothing alike. Back in the old days, music was recorded – analogue (cut or imprinted on vinyl).*

*A record creates the sound, as the needle follows the groove, and vibrates on pockets and ridges within the groove.... BTW,*

*On one side of an LP record, (that side runs for 20min), can anyone tell me how many grooves there are? (33 1/3 RPM \*20min= 667) – only one...*

*No, there's only one groove, and it spirals its way into the middle...*

*Now, back in the day, you had to really look after your records, because you couldn't download them again if they got corrupted. A vinyl disc, can get cracked or scratched... And when the needle hits that crack (or scratch), rather than following the groove where it's supposed to go, it can skip back to the previous groove, and when the record completes another revolution, it skips back again,, and your song goes; "Amazing grace how sweet the sound; sound; sound; sound..." ... you get the picture...*

*And thus our saying "It's like a cracked record." And I don't want to come across as a cracked record – I don't want it to seem like I only have one message to give (and it's not a fun one)...*

And I don't think Paul wants to be the cracked record either... And I reckon we can see this frustration coming out in today's reading, that he's having to say the things that he is... At one point he says "You drove me to it..."...

But do you know what I'm realising???

Paul **wasn't** a cracked record... And his message wasn't all about "watch out for those false teachers"...

His passion:

- is the Gospel

- is for truth
- is for Jesus Christ and salvation in Him...

*And I'm going to continue to use the image of a record – he keeps coming back around to it... He keeps coming back around to keep the message about Jesus Christ... But then he has to give a message to watch out for falsehood:*

- truth
- guard against lies
- gospel of Jesus Christ
- watch out for false gospel...

And all the way in, he's working his way in to the middle... What's his aim??? What's his goal at the centre??? His aim isn't to bignote himself – his goal, is to build the Corinthian church up in Christ...

And that's what our goal should be today – for the church to be built up in Christ... And sometimes, we have to hear warnings, and take corrections, for that to be so...

I believe the Lord ensured that letters like 2 Corinthians survived the millennia, and are recorded in our Bibles today,,, not so we can skip over them, to get to the bits we like to read – but they're there for our

- Instruction;
- Encouragement; and
- For our formation into the disciples of Jesus Christ, that God wants us to be...

They are for building us up in Christ.

Righto, so having said all that, I'm doing things a bit differently today... We usually start out with the reading, and then I explain it. But most of the message today, **is** the Bible reading.

What Paul says in today's reading, I feel it comes across as being "very personal" – Some of us are "thinkers". Some of us are "feelers". And for us to 'get' this today, we need to capture what Paul is feeling for this church...

At times,

- he'll appear to be boasting;
- it seems like he's gone crazy;
- uses sarcasm (in quite a cutting way);

But what he's doing, is he's "playing-the-fool", to make a point.

As I said in the introduction last week, in chapters 11 & 12 of this letter, there are 2 key words that keep coming up:

- Fool/Foolish/Foolishness (8); and
- Boast/Boasting/Boasted/Boastful (15)...

And the argument that Paul is making, is not to boast in ourselves – that's foolishness, and he actually **does** a bit of boasting, to demonstrate the foolishness...

Righto, let's just read it, and I will be stopping at certain points as we go... And I'm actually going to start, at the beginning of Chapter 11.

**11** I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! <sup>2</sup> For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. <sup>3</sup> But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. <sup>4</sup> For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. <sup>5</sup> Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. <sup>6</sup> Even if I am unskilled in speaking,,,,, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

<sup>7</sup> Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? <sup>8</sup> I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. <sup>9</sup> And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. <sup>10</sup> As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. <sup>11</sup> And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

<sup>12</sup> And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. <sup>13</sup> For such men are **false** apostles, **deceitful** workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup> And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup> So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise **themselves** as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. <sup>18</sup> Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. <sup>19</sup> For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! <sup>20</sup> For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. <sup>21</sup> To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

Righto, so the false apostles were big-noting themselves, and taking advantage of the Corinthians... And because Paul wasn't into self-promotion, he's being portrayed as being weak / inferior...

Let's continue:

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of — I am speaking as a fool — I also dare to boast of that.  
<sup>22</sup> Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.  
<sup>23</sup> Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one — I am talking like a madman — with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. <sup>24</sup> Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> 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 brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.  
<sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

**29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?**

Wow. He **is** talking like a madman, isn't he??? What is there to boast about??? Religious heritage???

Now, these sorts of things are good, but they're nothing to boast about... What an amazing advantage it is, to have a religious heritage, where my parents and my fore-fathers were men and women of faith... But it's no advantage unless I come to Christ... Many people today, despise their religious heritage – they don't value it... Yeah, it's part of their DNA, but they're not committed to Christ.

And the false apostles – they had the religious heritage – they had the Jewish upbringing,, But Paul – Paul was a trained pharisee, and so he trumped them on that one.

What about “servanthood”? Is being a good servant for God, something to boast about??? Well, if we're going to boast about “servanthood”, Paul shows us what that means... He securely links “servanthood” with “suffering”... If Christ was the Suffering Servant, why would the servants of the Suffering Servant not suffer...

And this is what Jesus told us to expect... Jesus said, if you're going to follow me, you have to forsake everything to follow me. There will be dangers. You might even die...

And my, how that flies-in-the-face of the prosperity gospel that is so commonly preached today – a false gospel, following a false Jesus...

But you know what??? It's not a competition for who has suffered the most for Christ...

Let's continue:

<sup>30</sup> If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. <sup>31</sup> The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. <sup>32</sup> At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, <sup>33</sup> but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

**12** I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

Righto. We're into a whole new area here, aren't we... He's made the point here: There's nothing to be gained by boasting...

Now, we're not supposed to covet, are we – don't go away and think about it – we're not...

But do you know what is commonly coveted within the church??? Spiritual experience. We covet it, and we honour it...

*And a good story of a spiritual experience – it sells... Many people marvel at the book and now the movie about a 4 year-old boy who claimed that, during his surgery, he had a vision of heaven... Apparently the movie grossed \$ US 101 Million.*

Now, I don't know whether that story was real, or whether it wasn't... I haven't read it, and I don't want to go into that, but I have heard people marvel at it...

And isn't it common, that when we hear of an amazing spiritual account, we don't only marvel at the Lord – we marvel at the person, and sometimes we put them up on a bit of a pedestal.... *“Oh, for them to have experienced what they experienced in the Spirit, they must be an amazing Christian...”*

But you know what? Paul had some amazing spiritual experiences, and I think that most of the time, he just kept them to himself. In the New Testament, both John and Paul record their experience of being taken (maybe in the Spirit) to heaven...

But how does Paul describe it??? Well, it's nothing to boast about... And it seems it **wasn't** his practice to talk about it... And in fact, some of the things he heard, he couldn't even repeat – they were too great for our ears...

So, let's go on.

<sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man was caught up into paradise — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — <sup>4</sup> and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

Alright, Paul is talking about himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person ... — he's making the point that spiritual experience **isn't** something to be boasted about. And it's not **supposed** to be a marketing tool — either for making money, or for preaching the Gospel...

And so, he doesn't want to be the one boasting,, but unless he **tells** them about his experience of being taken into Paradise, they're going to continue to believe that he's just jealous of the false apostles — that he's jealous of the spiritual experiences that they've had... (poor old Paul, he's missed out)

And so, he speaks in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person — he tells his story, as if it happened to somebody else. ...

<sup>5</sup> On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses — <sup>6</sup> though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a

fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

Alright, this is how Paul wants his credibility to be judged:

- Not on his eloquence;
- Not on his heritage;
- Not on his servanthood;
- Not on his personal spiritual experience;

How does Paul want his credibility as a preacher of the Gospel to be judged?

He said, Even though he'd be telling the truth (if he boasted of such things), He says: **but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.** And **now**, we're getting to the crux of it ... In this long diatribe about the integrity (or lack there-of) of those who preach in the church,, here's what Paul says we should be looking for:

And I'm going to summarise it as "The Fruit of the Spirit", and "preaching the truth" Earlier, he used the phrase "**a sincere and pure devotion to Christ**"...:

- What you see in me; and
- What you hear **from** me...

And we shouldn't be surprised by this. This is what Jesus told us... How do we tell a false teacher from a Godly teacher??? By their fruit... And the fruit is the fruit of the Spirit – are they living Godly lives??? Is the presence of the Holy Spirit evident in their life??? (Not in the form of 'spiritual

gifts/marvels' – those things can be faked – Satan sometimes fakes spiritual marvels) Are the fruit of the Spirit evident???

Love; joy; peace; patience; kindness; goodness; faithfulness; gentleness; self-control...

- What you see in me – do you see Godliness in me? - the Fruit of the Spirit; and
- What you hear from me...

The second way we judge a teacher, is the content of what they teach... And let me tell you, some of the most popular bible teachers in the world today – preaching to the biggest and flashiest congregations – the content of their message is abominable...

When Paul wrote to Timothy, in  
2 Timothy 4:3-4 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

- What you see in me – do you see Godliness?
- What you hear from me... - are you hearing the true Gospel?

V7

<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn

was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

You know, ever since I was a young lad (reading my Bible), I've wanted to know what this "thorn in the flesh" was (for Paul)...

Many people have speculated...

- Was it a physical disability?
- Was it a speech impediment of some kind???
- Was it a psychological condition???
- Was it a sin that kept rearing its ugly head??

Or:

- Was it the false teachers he had to keep putting up with???

The truth is, we don't know... What we do know, is there was one particular thing, that grated on Paul... And it hampered him. It left him feeling "I'm not as good-of-a servant of God as I could be – this is holding me back..." And it wasn't from God – it was from Satan...

He prayed for it to be removed – “God, take this thing away from me”... And his prayer was answered... Eventually...

He prayed twice, and there was no answer... But the third time he prayed, he **did** get an answer – it just wasn't the one he wanted.... “I'm **not** going to take it away from you, Paul”... **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”**

Now, that's a pretty good lesson for us when it comes to prayer...

1. Pray continually – keep praying... Keep praying until you get an answer;
2. Be willing to receive the answer, even if it's “No.”...

You know, a lot of lessons that get given on prayer today, put **us** in the place of God, where **we** decide what we want, where we pray for it, and keep praying for it, and believe it into existence.... But the correct way to pray, is in the attitude, that **God** is sovereign... Lord, this is what I am asking for. If it is Your will, please do it... But not my will, ,, Your will be done...

But not only is it a lesson on prayer – it also helps us to realise why we don't all become super-human ‘pictures of perfection’... – Why we still:

- Are weak;
- Sick;
- Mightn't be the most wonderful physical specimens;
- Still have those sins we get tempted by;

- Put our foot in our mouth...

2 reasons:

1. So that we don't become conceited "Oh, look how wonderful I am"
2. Because God's power is made perfect in our weakness...

Oh those words... I cannot tell you the number of times, that I've felt "an absolute failure" for Jesus....:

- The sin I've committed (yet again);
- The opportunity I had to share Christ, and I just said nothing;
- The time when I've tried to be funny, and I was 'cringe-worthy';
- The time I argued a point, and then realised I was wrong;
- The many times that I feel like I've failed Jesus....

But then those words that Jesus spoke to Paul, echo in my ears: **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."**

And I realise, "I can continue on.". The way that I experience the power of God, is God doing His pure, amazing, saving work, through the broken...

Because that's who I am. I'm the broken; Sometimes I'm a complete mess... But God's grace is enough for me... I'm not saved by doing good stuff for Jesus, and never failing Him – I'm saved by His grace... And His power, is demonstrated in my weakness...

Are you hearing me??? Do you know what I'm talking about? You've felt it haven't you??? God's grace is sufficient for you too... You don't have to be the perfect person to come to Jesus – He's the one who perfects you...

But... That doesn't mean that we let our weaknesses be an excuse for us to go on sinning...

Let's continue

V11

<sup>11</sup> I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. <sup>12</sup> The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. <sup>13</sup> For in what were you less favoured than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

More sarcasm. V14

<sup>14</sup> Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to

save up for their parents, but parents for their children. <sup>15</sup> I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? <sup>16</sup> But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. <sup>17</sup> Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? <sup>18</sup> I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

<sup>19</sup> Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. <sup>20</sup> For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish — that perhaps there may be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. <sup>21</sup> I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

That's where we're going to leave the reading...

Right throughout this letter, we can see where Paul's been defending himself... Like on the turntable:

- Defending himself;
- Comparing himself with the false apostles;
- And pointing them towards Jesus'....

Over and over again...

And he knows what it sounds like. He knows that it's been coming across as if he's defending himself... Defending himself, is a side-issue – what he's doing, is defending the Gospel he preached... He's been speaking in Christ,, for their upbuilding...

And that's the danger with false teaching – the true Gospel gets forgotten...

They've been getting led astray, into all sorts of sin and immorality... We saw the sort of stuff that was going on in the church when we studied 1st Corinthians...

- Sexual immorality;
- Incest;
- Pride;
- Selfishness;
- Envy;
- Slander;

That church was a mess...

And Paul's concern, was for them to get right with Christ – He expressed it in V2&3 of Chapter 11

I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to

Christ. <sup>3</sup> But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

Now, here's my hope/prayer for you/myself...

- That our thoughts would **not** be led astray from a **sincere and pure devotion to Christ**; and
- That when Jesus returns, we will be the pure bride that He's coming for...

That's been Paul's concern for the church;  
And that should be our concern for the church;

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus Christ,  
We praise You, that Your strength is demonstrated in our weakness.

Lord, even though we are weak, You are strong.  
Even though we fall, You pick us up;  
Even though we fail, You endure and are faithful...

Lord, we repent of times, we've been enticed by a false Gospel.

We are sorry for times when we've even preached a false image of Jesus...

God forgive us...

Lord, we are sorry for taking pride in ourselves,

or taking pride in our own spiritual experience we've enjoyed...

And forgive us for when we put men or women on a pedestal because of their testimony...

And Lord, may we never boast in anything other than You...

You are great;  
You are all powerful;  
You are all loving;  
All forgiving;  
Completely Just;  
Trustworthy; and  
True...

We praise You Lord,  
Amen.