

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] To Corinthians 11 verse 16 to 12 verse 10 tonight and then we'll finish the book next week. Let me speak like an idiot. It's the only hope I've got of getting through to you and showing how stupid you all are.

! Imagine I started a sermon like that. Well I just did. Not to insult you, but that is the Apostle Paul's logic in this passage.

It's exactly what he's doing. How do you speak to fools? How do you reason with those who are unreasonable? There's a book of Proverbs to help there, isn't it? So Proverbs chapter 26 and verses 4 and 5.

Let me give you these two back-to-back Proverbs, okay? Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. And in the very next breath, answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

That's a good demonstration, isn't it, of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature and Proverbs, particularly Proverbs, they are not rules, they are not laws.

[1 : 08] Because there you've got two contradictory laws, haven't you? Two contradictory rules. They're both true, but they apply to different situations. And wisdom means we have to apply God's wisdom to different situations. And in some situations when you don't speak like a fool, because stupid is a stupid talk, so let's not say.

If you talk like a fool, you might become like a fool. So in some situations you don't, but in other situations, in order to get through to a fool, you've got to speak their language. It's a high-risk strategy. A fool according to his following, lest he be wise in his own eyes. And that is what Paul does in this passage.

He plays them at their own game. And he says, it's the only way I can get through to you. It's the only way I can shake you out of your stupidity. So first of all, let's try and get the logic of the passage, and then we'll try and draw three lessons from it.

The logic of the passage, chapter 11, verses 16 and 17. 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'm saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would, but as a fool. Do you remember, there was a craze a few years ago, particularly with teenagers, and there was a little bracelet that people would wear, WWJD.

[2 : 36] Do you remember that? And they were everywhere in Christian circles. People thought they were the most wonderful thing. You could buy it in Christian bookshops alongside all sorts of other things. And for some, that was the rule in life. What would Jesus do?

That was the solution for every situation they found themselves in. They simply asked the question, what would Jesus do? Well, Paul is saying this in verse 17.

Jesus would never do what I'm about to do. Jesus would never do what I'm about to do. You can almost hear him saying in this passage, don't try this at home. He's obviously very uncomfortable about what he's about to do.

He's about to boast. Understand, he says, I say not as the Lord. I'm messing with your minds here. I'm playing games with you. I'm sending you up.

Paul says, I'm teasing you. You like boasting? You like boasting? You're so impressed by the super apostles in Corinth? You're impressed by boosters? Well, let me boast. Let me impress you with my CV. Let me list my credentials.

[3 : 39] And that is what he's doing. And Corinth, like our culture, is a success culture. People boasted of their achievements. They had their list of achievements.

So they filled their UCAS forms into good at university. And they said how amazing they were. And how they'd done the Duke of Edinburgh Award. And how they used to mow the church lawn regularly. And they did it better than anyone's ever done.

And when it comes to cleaning and all sorts of things, they had their list of success and triumphs. Just as we do today. So if you write your CV, I know some of you are, you should encourage it. You can get help from experts. And they tell you to put everything in there, don't they? From your university degree, if you've got one, to your food hygiene certificate. So listen to what one writer says.

Theirs was an age very much like our own, with no hope beyond death. It was an achievement-oriented culture. What you achieved in life was what really mattered. Sell yourself. [4 : 38] Highlight your strengths. Disguise your weaknesses. And that is very much like the culture we live in. Here's what one of the CV firms, you know, that help people write CVs.

They've described mistakes people make in their job applications. Here's what people wrote in job applications. One computer-hardened applicant began his letter, Dear Sir Omodem. Another risk of defence by signing off, I hope to hear from you, Shorty. One woman claimed to have left her previous job because of maturity leave.

Another person reported even more bizarrely, I terminated myself. And almost as bad, according to the Superb of Exodus, is those people who are really eager.

They're enthusiastic. So like the secretary, who claimed to type at 756 words per minute. And the accountant, whose 43-page CV included a reference from his old scout leader, his first aid certificate, and a photograph of his wife and child.

[5 : 40] So the incredible thing is that what people put in CVs. Well, in verse 21, you've got Paul's CV. And it's unlike any CV you've ever read or written. It's not Paul's list of adventures.

It's speaking like that, isn't it? I don't know whether you sign those young people's meetings where somebody would say, you want to live the most adventurous life you can live? You live as a Christian, and here's what happened to Paul when he was living as a Christian.

What an adventure it is to follow Jesus. You want to travel the world? Well, you follow Jesus. And that's not what it is. It's not a list of Paul's adventures.

What is it a list of? It is a list of Paul's failures. Well, no, it's not, is it? It can read like that. But the Apostle Paul was not a failure. Paul was an extraordinarily successful church planter and evangelist.

Gifted by God for the work. So, this isn't Paul pointing to his failures and saying, well, look, what a hopeless case I am. And everything I do, it ends in disaster. That isn't what he's doing here.

[6 : 43] What it is, is a list, actually, of his humiliations. And he is listing all the ways that following Jesus has humbled him and brought it down.

It starts off like anybody else's TV. And so, verse 22. Are they Hebrews? So why? Are they Israelites? So am I.

Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. I'm a better one. And then he says under his breath, doesn't he?

I'm out of my mind to talk like this. I'm going crazy to talk like this. Go against all the advice of the experts. And then he says, verse 23.

With far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I assumed that the hand of the Jews, the forty lashes less one.

[7 : 40] Three times I was beaten with rods. I've worked much harder than them all. Now, would you nominate this man for a call?

Would you have called a man who's been in prison, who's got a prison record? Five times I received at the hands of the Jews, the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was scolded. Three times I was shipwrecked. For a night and day I was adrift on the sea. On frequent journeys. In danger from rivers. From robbers. From my own people. From Gentiles. In the city. In the wilderness. At sea. From false brothers. In toil, hardship. Many asleep this night. Hunger, thirst. Often without food. In cold and exposure. They're not heroics, are they?

This is humiliation. And he's listed all the ways that he's been humbled by following Jesus.

Because, do you know what? Pride is a great problem for human beings, isn't it?

[8 : 40] Pride is a great problem in cold. And pride is a killer in Christian ministry. It's a great story of Alexander McLaren. Alexander McLaren was a preacher in Glasgow and Manchester.

And he had a student from straight out of college come and preach for him. And the student prayed with the men and their elders in the minister's room. And then he bounded out of the door up into the pulpit. Brimming with confidence.

Well, for the first couple of minutes it all went well. But then it all went horribly wrong. The sermon kind of began to get away from him and tumbled out of his hands. And it was a disaster. His mind went blank.

He'd forgotten all he had prepared. And he just wished the ground would swallow him up. After the sermon he crept out of the pulpit. Very shamefaced. Only to find Alexander McLaren in the vestry. Ladding, he said. If you'd got up the way you came down. You might have come down the way you went up. Do you see the point? Is it the logic for Paul's argument? That is the point that he wants to make against these people.

[9 : 41] Who are being influenced by the grotesque culture at Corinth. And the super apostles with their CVs. And that's the point Paul wants to make.

He wants to bring them down to earth a bit. That is this object of this little anecdote in verses 31 to 33. It sort of breaks the flow, doesn't it?

Particularly in verses 32 and 33 of the passage. You wouldn't probably put it in your biography if you were writing it. But you might wonder, why does Paul bother to tell us that it's actually there? It is actually there. It's in Acts 9 if you want to see it. He's saying to them, do you remember what happened to me when I was converted? Well, we all know, don't we, the story of Paul's Damascus Road Conversion.

We know that story. He rode into town on his high horse. With letters from the religious authorities. The persecutor of the church. He had letters on his high horse to persecute the church in Damascus.

[10 : 45] He proudly wanted to persecute Christians. And Jesus brings him down. And he is humbled. And he is blinded. And he is led away like a blind man to the house of Ananias.

And then, not only is he humbled, he is humiliated. Because the first thing he does as a Christian is to do a runner. He is lowered down over the town wall in a basket.

The proud persecutor of the church. This man who rides in on his high horse. Actually leaves town. The 33 lowered in a basket over the wall. That's what he is saying.

How embarrassing it was. I love that scene in verse 33. You can just imagine it, can't you? As he is lowered down into the basket. And he gets to the floor.

And he gets out of the basket. Looks around. And kind of walks off. I haven't believed nobody knowing. Nobody really plays a great picture. The proud persecutor becomes the persecuted.

[11 : 49] And he's going to leave town in a rush. It's all the more so humiliating when you discover that the highest honour that could be bestowed on a Roman soldier for bravery was something called the Corona Aurelius.

I probably pronounced that wrong. But it was a crown that was actually shaped like a city with ramparts. Like the walls of a city.

A city war with battlements and turrets. And it was the Roman equivalent of the Victorian cross. It was awarded in cases of extreme bravery by the Roman emperor.

And it was awarded to the first man over the wall when a city was being besieged. And it was normally awarded posthumously because the first man over the wall was usually killed.

So there weren't too many people who would have been alive when they received this medal for bravery. Many people claimed that they were the first over the wall. But in order to receive this Roman equivalent of the Victorian cross.

[12 : 47] You have to swear by the Roman gods. That you were telling the truth. That you were in fact the first person over the wall. Do you see what Paul does in verse 31?

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus who is blessed forever knows that I'm not lying. He swears by God. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus who is blessed forever knows that I'm not lying. He's not swearing by the Roman gods. But he's doing the same thing. He's alluding I think to the practice of awarding a medal for bravery. And he says the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ knows I'm not lying.

In Damascus I was lowered in a basket from the wall and I slipped quietly away. I was first over the wall. The very first thing that I did after I was baptised was to run away.

Like brave Sir Robin ran away in Monty Python. Do you remember that? Bravest of the brave Sir Robin. Brave Sir Robin ran away.

[13:47] Bravely ran away away. When danger reared its ugly head. He bravely turned his tail and flared. And yes brave Sir Robin turned about. And gallantly he chickened out. Bravely chickened to his feet.

He beat a very brave retreat. Bravest of the brave Sir Robin. Paul did a Sir Robin. It's a great sketch. Well I should. For certain aged people.

He ran away. He ran away. He ran away. Do you see what he's doing? He's sending them out. You get some of Paul's humor. I think you see that particularly in 2 Corinthians Paul is teaching them. He's playing the fool he's traveling about. He's listing his achievement. Boasting of his successes. Celebrating his triumphs. But he's boasting about the wrong things. He's boasting about the things that you've never put in a CV.

If you wanted to get a job he's booking fun of them. He's sending up the spiritual heroics of the super apostles. He's putting the bubble of their pride with a catalogue of humiliation. It's a wonderful comic parody.

[14:44] He's sending them out. There's the logic. You can see the thrust of what Paul is doing here. Now let's learn what he's doing. Let me give you three marks of authentic Christian ministry.

Authentic Christian ministry. Number one it is love driven. Number two it is cross shaped. And number three it is grace empowered. We see that here.

Number one. Christian spirituality is driven by love. And that's the first lesson. You see love is not puffed up. A loving parent is not proud to their children.

He's proud of their children. But not proud to their children. So you can have a high flying business executive. Who everybody cows down to. And wherever he goes people carry his bags for him. But he's not too proud to get down on his knees. And play with his grandkids. Love is not proud. Love is not puffed up. And Paul's love for the Corinthians is such that he is willing to play the fool.

[15:44] He's willing to play the fool. For their sake. For their good. To make a clown of himself. In verse 16. That is what he's saying. Tolerate me just as you would a fool.

The whole thing is a pantomime. He's putting on a red nose. And big shoes. And the face paint. He's making a clown of himself. But out of love for them. William Grimshaw was the vicar of Haworth in the 18th century.

And he was one of the Methodist men. John Wesley said of Grimshaw after staying with him. He said I've been with Grimshaw just a few days. And he truly is a man of God. A few men like him would make the nation tremble.

He carries fire wherever he goes. It's a great testament isn't it? And Grimshaw was one of the best Methodist preachers. But he's a great character. If you read his biography it's good fun. He was so passionate about his congregation.

That they would follow God's ways. And sometimes he would go to bizarre lengths. To make sure they were putting their faith into practice. There's lots of stories of Grimshaw seeking to win back his people. There's a lovely story of him.

[16:49] On one apparently cold and wet night. He dressed himself up in a beggar's outfit. With a shabby cap on his head. And he appeared hammering on a couple's door. Asking for food and shelter. The couple refused.

And told the disguised Grimshaw to go away. And Grimshaw pleaded his destitution. And said he'd die if you don't give me food. When they still refused. Grimshaw removed his disguise.

Quick as a flash and said it is I. And then promptly gave him a lecture on covetousness. And hard heartedness. He was playing the fool. There's great stories there of a man. He would not marry a girl he got pregnant.

He's on the way home from the pub. It's likely too much to drink in the pub. And Grimshaw dressed up as the devil. And when he. The man jumped over the gate.

Grimshaw came out with a pitchfork dressed as the devil. With his eye. Next time you're on the way home from the pub. You see someone dressed as the devil.

[17:45] It might give me a list. But he played the fool. Grimshaw does that. It's a great read. Read it. That's the sort of thing Paul is doing here you see. That's what love does. That is what authentic ministry. True Christian spirituality.

That is driven by love. And you see it in the list of humiliations. If you're somebody who is really important. Like the super apostles were. You've got a bodyguard. You're. You're not in danger from bandits when you're travelling round. You've got a bodyguard. You're not cold and naked and hungry. You're too important for that. You've got someone to carry on bags. If you're somebody important.

Look at verse 24. He talks about the 39 lashes. Not the 39 articles. But the 39 lashes. That's a peculiar punishment. That's a punishment.

That was specifically for the Jews in the Roman Empire. And they were given permission by the Roman Emperor. To punish in the sun it got 40 lashes minus 1. And Paul says I got that 5 times. [18:41] But the interesting thing was Paul was a Roman citizen. So he didn't need to go through that at all. He had a get out of beatings free card. Why did he go through that?

Paul says what to the Jew I became a Jew. He wanted to reach the Jews. And so he identified with them. Even to the extent of receiving a particularly Jewish punishment.

The 39 lashes. That is love. Look at verse 27. In toil and hardship. Through many. A sleepless night. In hunger and thirst. Often without food. In cold and exposure. And apart from other things. There's the daily pressure of me. Of my anxiety for all the churches. His heart is showing here. Who is weak and I'm not weak. Which church is in trouble and I don't feel that. Who is made to fall and I am not indignant.

His heart is showing his love as an apostle. The love of Jesus. It's the love of Christ isn't it? Who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. Who is able to empathise with us in our weaknesses.

[19:41] That is who Jesus is. He is our great high priest. Now who would you rather have to minister to you? Someone like the super apostles. And there are many troubles.

Who have got their act together. Everything they touch turns to gold. Or somebody like the apostle Paul. Who has been where you are. And experienced the struggles you go through. And is able to empathise with you.

That is the kind of pastor that you should want. And you need. That is the mark of an authentic Christian ministry. True Christian. Authentic Christian ministry is love driven.

Secondly is cross shaped. Now where do you see that? In this CV. What are the things that he boasts about? The things he suffered. The beatings. The floggings. The dangers.

The discomforts. The deprivations. The sleepers lights. They are the things he boasts about. And Jesus said. If anyone would come after me. Let him book into the Hilton. No. Or the Marriott.

[20:37] No. If anybody would come after me. Let him take up his cross. And follow me. And that's the way of the master. It's the way of the master. When so shall not the servant tread it also.

Then there's that little incident. That we've referred to in Damascus. It's not exactly Paul's finest hour is it? It's not a resounding success. The Damascus trip. You'd leave that out of the autobiography.

You can't imagine the super apostles. Having a chapter on their failures. And about missions that went wrong. But that is part and parcel of what it is. To be a Christian leader. To be a Christian. Just things will not always go right.

Will they? We will try things. And they will go disastrously wrong. Things don't always go right.

There's persecution. Suffering. Disappointments.

Failures. Hardships. And there's even an echo of Gethsemane. In chapter 12. Isn't there? He's given this thought in the flesh. And three times. I plead with the Lord.

[21:33] To take it away from me. This messenger of Satan. This ugly. Horrible. Uncomfortable thing. That God has permitted. Satan would have loved to use it.

To destroy me. But God wouldn't allow it. To destroy me. But God didn't allow it to happen. And here's something that Paul has to live with. For the rest of his life.

And God allowed it. And three times. I plead it. Just as Jesus pleaded. In the garden of Gethsemane. If it is possible. Let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless. Not my will. But yours be done.

And that is authentic Christian spirituality. Not riding from one success to another. From one triumph to another. Of never having any troubles. And never struggling. What is authentic Christianity?

It is pleading with God. It is unanswered prayer. Or more accurately. Answered prayer. That's not in the way that you want it to be. It is cross shaped. That is the shape of Christian ministry.

[22 : 30] That is the crown that Jesus wore. It was a crown of thorns. His crucifixion. Was his coronation outside the city. Crucified between two feet. It is so counter cultural.

Isn't it? It was in Corinth. And it still is today. It goes everything. Against everything. That we hold dear. That from our earliest days.

We are conditioned in our society. Aren't we? To achieve success. It's in school. You are to compare yourself with one another. That's the culture we live in. It's certainly not to be the culture that you find in the church.

Yet it is, isn't it? You go to ministers' conferences. And the first question they always ask. Is how many people are in your congregation? Or the latest. The big thing. Is that how many people are on your staff team?

That's the big thing. It's ridiculous. And we're infected with triumphalism. Aren't we? So we rarely talk about our failures as ministers.

[23 : 34] We certainly don't talk about the things that didn't work. The missions that failed. The church plants we've had to shut down. The people that didn't show up. We don't talk about that. And we need to turn it on its head, don't we?

And live counter-culturally. Or turn it the right way up. True Christianity. Authentic Christian ministry. Authentic Christian spirituality. Is love driven. Cross shaped.

And lastly it is grace empowered. Because the way of the cross is so hard, isn't it? It's so difficult. So against our nature. How are we going to do it? Well Paul lets us into his secret in 12.1-10.

And he talks about this out-of-body experience. And suddenly everybody's all ears. Because we're desperate to learn about an out-of-body experience, aren't we? Do you go to heaven? Or is he really there? And we want to hear about that, don't we?

A near-death experience. It's a craze of boxes now. And people who claim that they've spent 19 minutes in heaven. Sandra was showing me this balmy film that's about to come out of a girl who was in heaven. And she's been sent back by the Lord.

[24 : 33] It's total nonsense. Total madness. Paul tells us about that. As you notice, he has this out-of-body experience.

But look how Paul talks about it. So the first time you read it, you can't tell whether he's talking about himself or not. He talks about it in the third person. But by the time you get to verse 7, it's obvious he's talking about himself.

And he gives the show away. And he keeps, he says this to me, To keep me from being conceited. To keep me from becoming conceited. Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations of thought in the flesh.

That's good to me. A messenger of Satan to harass me. But he's still reluctant to talk about himself in such experiences. It's very rare, isn't it?

What the Apostle Paul is talking about in chapter 12 happened 14 years ago. That's what he says. So this is not kind of good morning Holy Spirit. Like Benny Hinn in the morning.

[25 : 34] This isn't something that happened every day as a matter of course for the super apostles. Talking to angels and finding yourself transported into heaven. No. Even for the Apostle Paul.

It only happened once and it happened 14 years ago. Because he's very reluctant to talk about it. And identify himself as the person to whom it happened. There's an old Greek legend about Icarus. Icarus has gone to Crete where he worked for King Minus. And he helped to build great big labyrinths. And Minus wouldn't allow him to leave the island of Crete. So he figured out how to fly. And he made wings out of birds feathers. And he attached them to his arms and shoulders with wax. And off they flew. Off he flew with his father, Danilus.

Daedilus. From the island of Crete heading back to the mainland. And Icarus became so excited about this form of travel. That according to the legend he wanted not to fly onwards to his destination. You know the story. He flew upward towards the sun.

[26 : 33] Do you know what happened? No. The higher he flew. The closer he got to the sun. And the heat began to melt the wax. That was holding the wings in place. Off came the feathers. And Icarus fell into the sea and was drowned.

That's the moral of the story. The Greek legend of the ancient world. It was told over and over again. It's a train of Renaissance paintings. The moral is don't fly too high or you may come to a bad end.

Don't be too proud or presume too much. Of the strange things that can happen. Or everything might go horribly wrong. That's what we've got here in chapter 12. You've got the Christian equivalent of that Greek legend if you want.

That if it's an extraordinary spiritual experience. And these special revelations that were given to him. At the same time Paul warns about the thorn in the flesh. Apparently when going to the commonplace.

When a Roman general returned from a victory or a conquest. The crowds would be there. They'd line the streets. But they would put a slave in the chariot with him. Whose job it was.

[27 : 33] To simply as the general returns to his hometown. And the crowds are out on the street. And they're praising him. The slave's job was to whisper in his ear. You too are mortal. You too are mortal.

So easy isn't it? When you're in public life. And you're up the front. And things are going well. It's easy to forget you too are mortal. And God put a slave in Paul's chariot. To remind him of his mortality. He gave him a thorn in the flesh.

We don't know what it was exactly. We're not meant to. It was something that Paul had to live with. For the whole of his life. And he calls it a messenger of Satan. And you mustn't think that Satan won some kind of victory here.

No. Satan is God's servant. We can say that. Even though he's evil. God is able to use evil for good. And God allows Satan to do something in Paul's life. That if Satan had had free hand. Satan would have destroyed Paul. But God is sovereign over Satan. And so this messenger of Satan. This thorn in the flesh. Is given in order to keep Paul humble. Nobody really knows.

[28 : 40] What Paul's thorn in the flesh was. It could have been a chronic illness. It could have been persecution. It could have been a upsetting sin. It could have been a constant source of temptation. It could be any of those things for you.

Which might be getting used to the fact. That you don't have the perfect body shape. I doubt that. That's what it was for Paul. But it may be for you. But I wonder have you accepted that. I wonder have you come to the point.

Where under the sovereignty of God. You see why God has allowed. Whatever it is into your life. That under the sovereign hand of God. He has allowed this to come into your life.

To keep your feet on the ground. And you see what Paul says. In verses 9 and 10. Chapter 12. John Scott.

One of the great. Preachers of the last century. One of the great men. He was so greatly used by God. He took a mission in Sydney in 1958. And it was the last night of the mission.

[29 : 57] And he completely lost his voice. He could hardly talk above a whisper. And there was a crowd of a thousand people there. To hear him. And before the meeting. In the small room. Before they came out to speak.

He asked for 2 Corinthians 12. To be read. And then they prayed for him. He came out on the platform. And there was a great crowd. Of a thousand people. A thousand people or more there. And this is what he said about it.

I croaked the gospel into the microphone. I was unable to modulate my voice. I couldn't put any personality into it. All I could do was speak in a monotone. Into the microphone. And I was asking God.

To show his power. Through my weakness. And he did. Hundreds of people came forward that night. At the end of that evangelistic rally. Scott says. I've been back to Australia. Seven or eight times since that mission.

And every time. Someone comes up to me. And says. Remember that night in 1958. When you lost your voice. I came to Christ that night. That's it isn't it. We don't need.

[30 : 53] The best music. Or flash lighting. Or stage performances. Or funniest preachers. It is when we're weak. And it's when we're conscious of our weakness.

And that is when God works. And that is true Christianity. That is authentic Christian ministry. It is driven by love. It is shaped by the cross. And it is powered by grace.

And God's strength. Is seen in our weakness. And that is what the gospel is all about. Because when did Christ die for us. Paul says in Romans 5. It was when we were weak.

It was when we were without strength. It was when we were powerless. That is the gospel. God's strength. In our weakness. And that is why boasting is so dumb.

And so foolish. Because boasting shows you've never understood the gospel. And it's when we are weak. And when we are conscious of our weakness. That is when God's strength is shown.
[31 : 48] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.