

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

Dr. George O. Wood

What if, while I'm on vacation, some guest speaker comes in and suggests to you that I am a religious phony—that I introduced strange and unbiblical ideas to this congregation. And I was out to only feather my own nest. Some might say, "We knew that all along." Others might say, "Let's give him a chance to answer these charges." Hopefully most would say, "Let's check the Scriptures and see if these allegations have any evidence to them."

That's exactly the situation Paul found himself in with the Corinthian church. He had founded the Corinthian church and been its pastor. But outside guest speakers had come in, whom he calls "super-apostles." Most likely, these outsiders were from Jerusalem, and being from that place would have a certain ring and air of authority about what they said. Probably they were saying something like this about Paul, "He's not one of the apostles the Lord appointed, not one of the original Twelve, anyway. He doesn't have the true gospel. And besides, he's not a very spiritual person anyway, certainly not as spiritual as us."

So Paul moves to defend himself in 2 Corinthians 10–13. The reason why he defends himself is not because his honor is at stake, but because the very nature of the church is at stake—what it will believe, who it will listen to. If he doesn't defend his apostleship, then the church very freely might wander into error.

We're moving rather leisurely through these chapters, as you would progress through a seven-course dinner, and taking time to enjoy each course along the way. Two weeks ago, we looked at verses 1–6, which described to us the principles by which a Christian should defend himself, principles that involve following the Lord's example, using approved weapons and using

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

punishment as a last resort. In today's passage, verses 7–18, we gain a picture of the qualities of a spiritually humble person. There are four such qualities we will look at.

I. The first quality in spiritually humble person is that that individual does not see himself as more spiritual than someone else.

“You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he” (2 Corinthians 10:7, NIV).

The unstated criticism of Paul here is that he may be a Christian, “but he surely doesn't have as much of Christ as we have.” Therefore, Paul must say, “We belong to Christ just as much as them.”

The spiritually immature person often sees himself as more mature or more spiritual than someone else. And a spiritually humble person never sees himself in those terms.

I recall, when I was in college, because of the religious tradition in which I grew up, I felt like I had more of the gospel than anyone else. Therefore, if there were categories of heaven, I was definitely in the first cabin. I had the particularly judgmental views against persons from certain church communions. Among them, Catholics. I recall, when I was a junior in college, going down to spend the weekend in a Trappist monastery in the Ozarks, going with the idea of having a cross-cultural experience, to see how these poor people lived. While at dinner the first evening, the head person, the abbot, got up and served me food. His gentle humility was a rebuke to all my Protestant egotism. While I did not give up my Protestant theology or my understanding of Scripture, it sure radically altered my view of spirituality. Just a very humble brother, who later—by the way—received the baptism in the Spirit.

I recall when I went to Fuller Theological Seminary and had really never been around people of different church denominations. I had a very stereotypical idea of what a Presbyterian was. A

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

Presbyterian is someone who had, perhaps if at all, an intellectual faith in God. Not very emotional or very given to piety in expressions of their spiritual worship. Besides, everybody knows that the Presbyterian Church is located next to the bank. Those are my very simple stereotypical views of Presbyterians. I found that I was to have a Presbyterian roommate. I thought, “I hope I can survive spiritually this year and not backslide from living with him.” I discovered that this gentle, sensitive Presbyterian was far more spiritual than I ever hoped to be. His quiet life of spirituality, his quiet steady disciplines as a Christian, put me to shame. It made me reevaluate this whole idea of looking at other people and saying, “They may be Christians, but they’re not as spiritual as I am.”

I’ve found that you never really lead anyone to a deeper walk in God by playing the spiritually superior game. If you see yourself as spiritually superior to someone else, then it means that they need to come up to your level, and that in itself creates a barrier and a resistance that keeps people from experiencing more of the Lord. I like what Niles said about evangelism. He said that evangelism simply was one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. I think that’s true. It’s the communication of hunger for God and deeper things in the Christian life. We communicate that best by simply being beggars telling other beggars where we found bread, where we found help and spiritual nurturing.

Too much wounding takes place in the body of Christ today over that word “spiritual.” Persons, or even groups of people, insist that someone else is a Christian, but not as spiritual as they. At times, we may use all kinds of artificial indexes of determining what constitutes spirituality. My teenage years were spent in a church that, in its worship, was more quiet and sedate. And persons who enjoyed a more enthusiastic worship service sometimes made rather interesting remarks about our church. One that I remember was that when the Lord comes, Central

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

Assembly would be the first to go up in the rapture, because the Scriptures say “the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Yet in that church, which some judged to be dead, I found people who ministered in powerful ways to my life, in spiritual depth. Sometimes, we engage in throwing things at one another. Even one church body will say of another church body, “They’re not as spiritual or as deep.” All of those things are artificial tags.

There’s a difference between being spiritual and being godly. The Pharisees were very popular in Jesus’ day. We recognize that from sources even outside the New Testament. They were very popular with the common people. They were spiritual. They went to prayer. They said, “God, I thank You that I’m not as other men.” They passed the test of what many people thought was spiritual. They had a holy tone when they spoke. They dressed spiritually and they acted spiritually. Especially when it came to acts of personal piety. But they were not godly.

Paul had a keen consciousness of being the chiefest of sinners. He knew that people in need get the most strength from those who have been as low as or lower than themselves. So, therefore, he took his stand on the lowest step. He said, “I am the chiefest of sinners.” It’s from that vantage point of “When I am weak, then I am strong,” it’s from the vantage point of “I came to you with much fear and trembling,” that we create the kind of humble climate that invites people to a deeper spiritual experience with God. The spiritually humble person does not see himself as spiritual as someone else.

II. A second quality of the spiritually humble person is that they are open to correction (verses 8–11).

The whole problem with the Corinthian critics was that they were not open to Paul’s correction. You see this in what he says in these verses. “For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’ Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present” (2 Corinthians 10:8–11, NIV).

There was a smug sense of spirituality among Paul’s critics at Corinth that made them almost uncorrectable. If you see yourself as spiritual, then automatically you kind of set yourself up as a person to express, “I’m doing fine. I don’t need correction.” Paul’s critics reject his correction. In doing so, they find fault with the messenger. “Who are you, Paul, to tell me that? You’re very unimpressive when you speak. You are not a scintillating speaker. You have a very puny physical presence. We’re looking for a dynamic speaker, a world-renowned preacher, internationally acclaimed.” How many times do we freely use terms like that in introducing someone? “World famous,” “a great speaker.” That’s what we’re often looking for.

Paul evidently didn’t match that. Someone has said, “There are no great preachers, only a great God.”

The spiritually humble person is open to correction—even if it comes from unimposing people. Those giving correction will always attempt to build others up as they give the correction rather than simply letting the correction tear down. Paul says, “My ministry to you is building you up rather than pulling you down.”

I have occasion to watch correction being given in the body of Christ. If there is one area today that has the most prevalent misuse of correction, that pulls people down rather than building people up, it’s the well-intentioned fellow believer who comes with the ministry of correction to a sick or suffering brother or sister and says something like, “This wouldn’t be happening to you if there wasn’t some sin in your life.” Such kind of correction omits the fact that Jesus teaches us

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

that the rains fall on the just and the unjust. Such correction, to my knowledge, has never produced a healing. It communicates a false view of God. It presumes to take on the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Word, in telling somebody else what their sin is—a capability the Holy Spirit has not granted to someone else. And it winds up not remembering that the devil, not the fellow brethren, is the accuser of the brethren.

We need to be careful with how we use words with people when they're going through hurt and weakness and difficulty in their life. We need to be careful because sometimes, in a very smug sense of spirituality, we can do a lot of wounding and hurting.

If you are on the receiving end of a false correction, then spiritual humility and gentleness is called for as well. But the spiritually humble person is open to correction, and when giving correction always seeks to build up rather than tear down.

III. A third quality in the spiritually humble person is that they recognize how wrong it is to do worldly comparisons.

“We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory” (2 Corinthians 10:12–16, NIV). The spiritually humble person

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

recognizes how wrong it is to do worldly comparisons. Comparing ourselves with other people is not the true index of spirituality.

Paul says, in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you do not think of yourself more highly [or more lowly] than you ought. But rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” If we compare ourselves to others, one of two things is going to happen. Either we’re going to be excessively built up with pride, thinking we’re better than someone else. Or we’ll be cast down with depression, thinking we’ll never be as good.

Therefore, we really can’t enjoy it when someone else has an attainment, because we’ve immediately got to compare where we are as compared to where they are. When we compare ourselves with others, we’re not able to enter into another person’s joy, because we just think about ourselves.

Paul’s standard of comparison was not what others were doing, but what the Lord had asked him to do and if that was being done. As he comes to that standard of comparison, he realized that the Lord had called him to a lot of things, and especially had called him to the regions beyond. So he doesn’t settle down, even though, up to that time, he’s been a very successful apostle and planted the church in many different places. He’s reaching for the regions beyond. He does not have a “maintenance” philosophy of life, that he’s arrived at a certain point and all he has to do for the rest of his life is maintain. He had come to that point in life where he was determined to be on the cutting edge of growth. If there’s anything we can do to galvanize our life spiritually, it’s to make an inventory what we’re doing and then ask, “What has God called us to do?” And get out on the cutting edge of where the Lord is.

We’re making a mistake if we wait to further extend ourselves in God’s work until everything that we’re presently doing is 100 percent in order. I know there are church fellowships who say,

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

“We’re not going to get around to evangelism or missions until we’ve got things in order in our own church.” So they concentrate on building the body and getting it alright. We’ll get the church perfect, and then we’ll think about evangelism or missions.

When you read this letter to the Corinthians, you recognize immediately that this Corinthian church was not perfect. It had so many problems—Paul could have poured the rest of his life into the Corinthian church. But I think as Christians we recognize that, because of the impact of fallen human nature, there is a certain imperfectability about even the institution of the church.

We’re not content to simply pour ourselves into a maintenance kind of a mode. Paul says, “I know there are problems at Corinth, but there are people who have never even heard the gospel. I’ve got to get out on the cutting edge and go to regions beyond.” That’s why whole churches that live with the vision of getting out there instead of just turning inwardly on themselves are inevitably alive and churches who say, “Let’s build a tight fellowship and enjoy one another and get spiritually perfect,” are dying from the inside out. In our own personal lives, we need to recognize the importance of our ministry in the body of Christ in so many different areas.

A little clipping I came upon says, “Once upon a time, there were four people—Everybody, Somebody, Nobody and Anybody. When there was an important job to be done, Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. When Nobody did it, Everybody got angry, because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought that Somebody would do it. But Nobody realized that Nobody would do it. So it ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody, but Nobody did what Anybody could have done in the first place.”

A spiritually humble person does not see himself as more spiritually humble than someone else. The spiritually humble person is open to correction. The spiritually humble person realizes how wrong it is to make worldly comparisons. And finally...

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

IV. Fourthly, the spiritually humble person leaves commendation to the Lord.

“But, ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends” (2 Corinthians 10:17–18, NIV). William Barclay has this great phrase, “The trouble with the arrogant Christian is that he feels rather that Christ belongs to him than he belongs to Christ.” What a profound comment.

We really, as a priority in life, want to seek the commendation of the Lord. That’s the only commendation that counts. Sometimes in church conventions, in our particular denomination, we’ll recognize churches that excel in areas of giving to missions, home missions, or whatever. Sometimes very large trophies will adorn the platform and will be presented to various pastors of churches. I get somewhat uncomfortable with that, I confess. Although I suppose, as a church, we’ve picked up a few of those. I’m reminded of what C. M. Ward, our Revivaltime speaker, once said in a meeting where so many of these trophies were all over the place. We have a phrase that says, “Someday, we’re going to lay our trophies at Jesus’ feet.” Ward stood up at one of these meetings and said, “When we lay all of our trophies at Jesus’ feet, we ain’t gonna be able to see Jesus!” I could just see Jesus, hidden behind all this melted aluminum!

The commendation of the Lord is what matters.

I want to close this point and sermon with a long quotation. It’s from my mother. I treasure her sermons. One of her favorite phrases was, “The Lord, on that day, will not ask us if we’ve been successful, but if we’ve been faithful. We look to the Lord’s commendation for our life, not man’s.” I’m not sure whether these are mom’s own words or whether these are words she found in a book, but they expressed to me this whole idea that Paul is talking about, of seeking commendation from the Lord: Our Lord sums up the whole of the Christian man’s duties in one

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

word—“faithful.” This implies discharge of responsibility. Recognition of obligation and continued consciousness that we are not proprietors of what we have, but stewards.

Some folks say, “I don’t want to belong to a church. I don’t want any responsibility.” Others belong, but take none. What we have, we may impart. What we have is what we have received. We’re distributing centers. We hear a great deal about deepening the spiritual life by prayer, conventions, Bible study. All these are good—in their place. But the best means, the most powerful means by which Christians could deepen their spiritual lives, would be a more honest attempt to be faithful in what is least—that which we think doesn’t matter. For if we are faithful in that which is least, then God will entrust us with greater responsibilities. God will not ask you on that day, “What did the *church* do?” But, “What did *you* do?”

Yesterday’s things are little things. Tomorrow and today are made up of doing little things. Some have few talents, some have more. Whitfield won thousands to the Lord. You may not be a Whitfield, but you can still witness to someone. Are you faithful by giving, praying, ministering, witnessing and attending the means of grace? We will be rewarded, not according to our success, but according to our faithfulness. Let us check up on ourselves and see where we stand. Not in our own sight, but in God’s.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we take these moments to do that very thing—stand in Your sight. We realize that if we had to stand in Your sight by virtue of our own work and self-effort, we would be a long way from You. But Your grace has already brought us directly into Your presence. Lord, that grace elicits a response from us as thanksgiving. So anew we offer our lives to You—to be used by You, to find our priorities in You. Lord, each of us, in our own way, pull back the curtain of our life for a moment and are honest to admit to You, “We are hungry for more of You.” There’s not

SPIRITUAL HUMILITY

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

one of us here who knows in their heart that they have arrived spiritually. You've made us with a capacity for knowing You, and a capacity that keeps on growing and growing. We ask, Holy Spirit of God, that You would fill up our lives with the Father's presence, with the presence of the Lord Jesus. And that we would indeed be persons who are known as spiritually humble men and women of God in Your presence. Because of that, we're powerful—powerful in our personal lives for You. Powerful as a witness. Powerful as an entire congregation. Lord, there may be an individual here who has not taken time, in recent weeks or months, to evaluate their relationship with You. This day perhaps finds them with a growing sense of yearning, realizing that what they've been reaching out for has not, in the final analysis, been satisfying. But only You can satisfy the heart. We ask, therefore, Lord, as a special treasure in this service, that there would be individuals who quietly, or audibly, open their life in a new way to Your loving care and say, "Lord, I'm here today to present myself afresh to You. To say in my heart of hearts, 'I lay everything I have before You. It's at Your disposal. Everything I am, everything I own, everything I seek. I lay it before You for Your approval and for Your guidance. Here, in this place, today, I commit myself to You anew.'" Work in our hearts, O God, that we may hear, on that day, the commendation, "Well done." Thank You for Your presence. Through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.