

Christian Credentials
II Corinthians 11:16-33

INTRODUCTION

Recently someone handed me a little card that had a catching little line on it. It said, "If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" That question does provoke some thought. It raises the question about evidences. Which kind of evidence would be the most convincing? What are the proofs that indicate we are true followers of Jesus Christ?

Our text helps us answer this question. It is a passage which is admittedly out of character for the great Apostle Paul. No one knew this better than he. He readily admits in the text that it is out of character for a Christian to be boasting unless he is boasting in the Lord. Yet he found himself in a situation in which it seemed necessary even if it was foolish. His critics in Corinth had been comparing their ministry to that of Paul. They had placed Paul and his ministry in a very unfavorable light. It seemed necessary for him to give some defense of his commitment to Christ and of his ministry for Christ. This is what we have in this strange text.

While this passage does not lend itself to an easy exposition, there are some things that surface from the passage. It becomes rather obvious what the Apostle considered to be important. The true credentials of the servant of Jesus Christ are pretty clear. He rather quickly discounts the things his critics were placing the most emphasis on. They were emphasizing their heritage and their knowledge. "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendents? So am I. Are they the servants of Christ? I am more." Paul did not consider these things of heritage to be of any value as evidence of a true commitment to Christ. He is ready to claim that he is more a servant of Christ than any of them. He puts before us three rather weighty considerations as the evidence.

I. ENDURANCE OF DIFFICULTIES

The critics of Paul were making bold claims about their commitment to Christ, but Paul wants to present a commitment that has been tested by difficulty. How much fire can your commitment endure? This is a remarkable personal recitation on the part of Paul. A passage like this lets us know just how little about the life and ministry of this remarkable man we really know. Much of what he shares here is unmentioned in the Book of Acts.

Let's just look at some of the details. He writes, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely and been exposed to death again and again." Just this list would be enough to stop most men. But he continues.

"Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one." At Feast they were careful to observe the Old Testament law when they beat him for his faith. The law limited a beating to thirty-nine stripes. "Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers." This is a most impressive list. It is shared with us very reluctantly, because Paul did not see them as being things of special merit. They were simply the things that had tested his commitment to Christ. His endurance of these things are cited as the evidence of his commitment to the Lord.

I am very reluctant to apply this to us. What dangers have we faced for Him? What hardships have we endured? Just how much pressure could we withstand? Actually, if this is the kind of evidence you need for being convicted as a Christian ... many of us are safe. We may have endured some inclement weather a time or two. We might have exposed ourselves to the danger of catching a cold, but that is about as far as it would go. I can still recall the shock that came to me as a young pastor as I began to learn by experience just how little the modern Christian can endure. I can still remember having to go and encourage a member of the church who had become offended over an unintentional slight by me. Unknowingly, because my mind was preoccupied with something else, I failed to greet this person properly. They were so deeply offended, that they were ready to turn their backs upon the work of the Lord. I would not mention this if it were so unusual. It just happens too often, that people forsake the way of the Lord over small offenses. Paul sets forth this record of enduring terrible offenses as a proof that he is really committed to the Lord.

II. THE BEARING OF THE BURDEN

He writes, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" Paul is citing the burdens that he has borne as proof that he is a true disciple of the Lord.

The "concern" about which he writes, could be translated "anxiety". Paul accepted some responsibility for the welfare of the churches, and it bothered him when things were not going well for them. He did not keep himself detached from the churches. This sense of concern moved him to some very positive actions.

The bearing of the burden moved him to work. Twice in the text, he refers to his work. He says, "I have worked much harder." Again he writes, "I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep." He put his work above his own need for the necessities of life. The pursuit of the work kept him from food, sleep, and sometimes even adequate clothing.

This stands in an ironic contrast to the false teachers who had come to Corinth. Even though, they make a great emphasis upon works, they have become a

burden rather than bearing a burden. They seemed to be more interested in what the church could do for them, than what they could do for the work of the Lord.

This is a thing that bothers me about contemporary churchmanship. I find many people concerned about what the church can do for them, but few are interested in helping to bear the burden. A willingness to help do the work is good evidence of a true commitment to Christ.

The bearing of the burden moved him to pray. Read the letters that Paul wrote to the churches. They are filled with prayers for the churches. Because of the sense of responsibility that he had for the church, he prayed for its health and prosperity. He wisely mingled together his works and his prayers.

This concern of Paul reached out to the weak and to the strong. He felt the weakness of the weak and the defeats of the defeated. He was a man to true Christian compassion.

This brings us face to face with a major problem faced by every larger church. Our consultant from the Home Mission Board told our committee that the larger the church, the more difficult it is to find workers. It is easier for the membership to assume that in the midst of the many there is someone else who will do it. The large staff of the larger church can also contribute to the problem. Why should I bear a burden when I am paying a large staff to bear the burden? Unless we can defeat this kind of attitude in the life of our church, we are destined to be an ineffective people. The credential for a true disciple of our Lord is that he bears the burden. He shoulders his share of the responsibility for the welfare of the church and the work of God.

III. THE REJOICING IN WEAKNESS

This is the most revealing credential of all. "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness." The critics like to boast of the things that put them in a good light. Paul liked to boast of the things that put the Lord in a good light, and the things that revealed his true humanity. He approaches this with an unusual amount of intensity, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying." This is an indication of how deeply Paul felt about this.

Some have been bothered by the first illustration Paul gives of this. He takes us back to his first venture forth in the service of Christ. From a human perspective, it did not turn out very well. It was not the kind of thing you would want to write home about. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, and his instruction by the servant of the Lord, Ananians, he launched forth into the service of the Lord immediately. He began to bear witness to Jesus Christ right there in the city of Damascus. The final outcome was that he had to leave the city in a rather unflattering kind of way. He was let down over the wall in a basket to escape the authorities who were watching for him at the gate. It was surely not a sign of strength to have to escape from the city in such a manner, but was rather a sure sign of weakness. It must have been very humiliating. Yet the attitude of Paul

was such that he gloried in this. It was for him an opportunity from the Lord, to be humbled for his Lord. He would not shun such humiliation, but would rather welcome it.

How do you feel about those things that humble you? How do you respond to those situations that reveal your true humanity? Can you glory in your weakness? The world about us tries so desperately to hide its weakness. They want to always put just their best foot forward and to hide anything that would not be complimentary in every way. They omit the "basket" experiences from their biographies. Jesus Christ changes this attitude. He brings us to the place that we glory in our infirmities. We do not use them as an excuse for doing nothing, but rather commit them to God in simple trust in His sufficiency.

Conclusion:

This is not one of my favorite passages from this letter. It is a passage that always bothers me when I read it. It causes me to ask questions about my own commitment to Jesus Christ. Does it affect you like that? What should we do about it? Surely, we should take this great Apostle as our example and cultivate in our lives the things that he cited as credentials for a Christian. The world needs to see what a real Christian looks like!