

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT

2 Corinthians 11:1–15

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The first fifteen verses are under the theme “Spiritual Insight.” There are four spiritual insights I want to share today from this passage of Scripture. We’ll read the passage as we come to each of the four insights, to tie them together.

Very few, if any, of us became a Christian solely through hearing the Christian message. We were attracted by a Christian person. We saw the message being lived out in a Christian person’s life. There’s a dynamic to the Christian message—that it needs to take on flesh, just like the Word became flesh. So when we came to Christ, we saw the Lord through a person. Then we became interested in the message, as the person talked to us.

The beautiful thing about 2 Corinthians—especially these last four chapters, which involve the defense of Paul’s apostleship—is that, certainly above all his other letters (he wrote thirteen in all), this book of 2 Corinthians give us the best opportunity to see Paul as a human being.

Perhaps in Romans and Galatians we see him as the apostle and the theologian, who gives us the doctrinal understanding of what it means to be justified by faith and live a sanctified life.

But it’s in 2 Corinthians 10–13 that we see him as a human being. The reason why we see him as a human being is that he’s needing to share his personality, as he defends himself from the vicious attacks of his opponents. Most likely, we would have never had the opportunity to meet Paul, the person, were it not for the fact that he had opponents. But stresses and adversities can produce some very positive results in Paul’s life, as well as in ours.

So, because the Lord allowed these outer stresses, we’re able to see the inward life of a man of God. By the way, the person who has no opposition or opponent to wrestle with, probably will

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never become spiritually strong. It's the old physical principle of pumping the iron. If you wanted these muscles to develop, you would be out doing something about it. The pressure builds corresponding, counterbalancing muscles. It's the same way spiritually.

Today's passage, verses 1–15 of chapter 11, gives us a grasp of some of the great spiritual insights of the man in Christ, Paul.

I. The first insight I ask in the way of a question: How deeply do you care about what happens spiritually to those you love?

See how deeply Paul cares, in verses 1–2, “I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (NIV). Paul is heading into some moments of confrontation with the Corinthian church.

I, by nature, am a nonconfrontational person. I take the stance that, if I just ignore what's happening, like an ostrich, sooner or later everything will work out all right. Sometimes it's very frustrating for people who know me very closely and work with me to work with me, because I have this nonconfrontational nature that doesn't want to head into problems and correct them. I feel sort of like the deacon said, “I reckon some church problems are like the manure on the barn floor. It doesn't smell half as bad if you don't dig it up.” That's the way I feel about a lot of things. It's better left alone—to not dig them up.

But there are times when you need to confront. And there are times when you need to show you care by confronting. Paul was that kind of a person. Love cares. And love cares enough to confront. Paul slides into his correction very softly, which is a good idea if you're going to correct someone. He does a little self-depreciation, a little irony. Then he goes on, in verse 2, to say, “I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God.”

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Too many times, as Christians, we've been taught that all jealousy is wrong. That's not true. Not all jealousy is wrong. In Exodus 20:5, God himself says, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God." There is a good and bad jealousy. We need to stay away from the bad jealousy. Bad jealousy is jealousy *of* someone. Being jealous of their looks. Jealous of their possessions. Jealous of their position. Jealous of their wealth. Good jealousy is jealousy *for* someone. To be jealous for them, to protect them. Jealous for them—to save them from harm and wrong. Good jealousy is if somebody is coming along and picking on my kids, and is ready to beat them up, and strong dad comes along. Good jealousy is being jealous for them, so that I protect them from harm. Bad jealousy is always selfish. Good jealousy is always selfless.

Paul sees the Corinthian church as if he was protective of his daughter. The betrothal to one husband, in biblical times, was followed by a waiting time, until the marriage ceremony took place. The father arranged, with the daughter's approval, the marriage; and his and her desire was that she might be presented as a pure virgin to her husband at their marriage. Paul sees that his evangelizing conversion work among the Corinthians was their betrothal to Christ, with a marriage taking place at the wedding of the Lamb—the marriage supper. He says, therefore, that he is jealous over them, because the temptation is that they will be corrupted because of these false teachers. He wants to present them as a pure virgin to Christ.

That term, "pure virgin," as applied to the Corinthians on spiritual level, makes one sit up a moment and pause, because it is a powerful term and it shows how complete and full God's grace is. The people that are being identified here, at that conversion, as being betrothed as a pure virgin, are the people who, before that moment of conversion, are described in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 in these terms: "sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers." Quite a group!

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And in one moment's time, they have become a pure virgin, betrothed to Christ. Because there's a magnanimous sense of God's grace, an amnesty provision that stretches out and covers all of our sin and presents us pure to the Lord.

Paul cares deeply about these people, who stand in a place of spiritual righteousness before God. Part of his way of correcting them is to remind them how beautiful and precious and grace-filled they are to the Lord. From time to time, we need to remind ourselves that we stand in the same relationship to the Lord.

Some people, when they give correction, only give correction by putting down. In the beginning, Paul's correction, which flows from his deep spiritual care for them, begins with a build-up image. In the book *Caring Enough to Confront*, the author gives five options we take in confrontation when we get into a jam with somebody. We may elect, first, to say, "I'll get him! I'll get him back." That's one way. Another way is to say, "I'll get out. Solving this problem isn't worth the pain. I'm checking out of this relationship." Third, "I'll give in. I'll be a doormat and let them do what they want." Fourth, "I'll meet you half-way." That's compromise. And the fifth way is the way Paul uses, "I care enough to confront. I care about you, but I care about truth as well. I want you to know God's truth. I love you enough to tell you the truth."

Maybe you're here and you're not a Christian, and you're here because somebody—a family member or friend—has invited you. "They won't leave me alone. They keep telling me about how I need Jesus." They love you, or they wouldn't be telling you that. They care enough about you spiritually to confront you and to bring you to Jesus.

We need to say, from time to time, in a confrontational situation, "I love you. And if I love you, I must tell you the truth. I want your love, but I want the truth. Let me love you enough to tell you

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the truth.” If you care deeply about another person spiritually, you may need to confront. Do it like Paul. Begin by affirming the other person.

If you are the one who is being confronted, don’t flare out like a porcupine. That’s a normal trait, isn’t it? When we’re confronted—to stick all our quills out and be defensive at that moment.

We’re to receive correction gently and humbly, even when it may be misplaced. Do you care enough about someone to spiritually confront them? That’s one insight that flows out of this passage.

II. A second insight that flows out of it, I’m asking in the form of a question: How sensitive are you to the prospect of deception in your life?

Paul is sensitive to the fact that the Corinthians were very susceptible to deception. “But I am afraid that, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those ‘super-apostles.’ I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way” (2 Corinthians 11:3–6, NIV).

In this passage that deals with deception, Paul is identifying the devil as a beguiling serpent, using the figure from the Garden of Eden. It’s interesting that the devil is not only presented as a beguiling serpent, different from our serpents today; Peter, in 1 Peter 5:8, identifies the devil as “a roaring lion running around, seeking whom he can eat up.” This raises the question as to what is the devil. Is he a beguiling serpent or is he a lion? Of course, the answer to that is “Both.”

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To the Christians that Peter was writing to, the Christians that are facing dark adversity and difficult moments, he is a lion. He is threatening. He is devouring. He is hauling them off to be scourged, to whipping posts, to the coliseum, to jail, to the confiscation of their property, he is a roaring lion. But to Christians living in nonthreatening moments, he is a serpent, an angel of light. He may be as scary as a lion, or as attractive as the serpent in Eden.

I think we resist him more easily when he comes to us as a lion, because we more easily see his nature. It is when he comes as a beguiling serpent that we find him appealing—most to us. He tricks us as he tricked Eve. When he comes as a beguiling serpent, he does not say to Eve, “I’m the devil. And I’m here to ruin your life. If you listen to me, I’m going to destroy your marriage. I’m going to uproot you out of paradise. I will introduce you to, and condemn you to, death. I’ll destroy your walk with God, poison your sons against one another so that one kills the other. Then I’m going to curse the whole human race through you.” Eve would have shrieked and run the other way.

How different, though, when he does come, “I’m your friend. I’m here to help you. I want you to have a great time.” There’s so much excitement and fulfillment, you can’t afford to miss it. Satan advertises his products like beer companies advertise theirs. The breweries never show a teenage victim of a drunk driver. The cigarette companies never take you to the cancer ward and show you the emphysema victim, struggling to get enough breath to warn you not to smoke. That would be injurious to sales. And the devil is the same master of packaging.

When the devil comes to you with the temptation of fornication, he doesn’t show you a picture of how your sexuality is going to be twisted, your values crossed and confused, or your inner life hardened against God, or even the grim picture of a potential aborted unborn baby. When he tempts you with adultery, he doesn’t show you the devastation that’s going to happen to your

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children or to those who really love you. It's the same way when a false teaching comes. He doesn't show you the danger of the false teaching. It looks good, it looks attractive, it comes from maybe an articulate spokesman. All false needs is an articulated spokesman.

Paul does a deliberate play on words in verse 4, "For if someone comes to you..." (NIV). And that verb "comes to you" is the exact opposite of the root meaning of the word "apostle". Apostle means a "sent one." And the ones that were teaching the false doctrine at Corinth were ones who had come on their own authority. No one had really laid hands upon them. No one had credentialed them. They had passed through no doctrinal examination. They had passed through no character reference. If there's any danger in freelance Christianity, it is this danger of a person coming to you who boasts of the fact that they didn't go through any process of getting credentials or filling out a form that would have required them to identify their doctrine or furnish character references. They simply came. Paul says, "You can tell who they are by listening to what Jesus they proclaim, what spirit they impart and what gospel they communicate."

The person who comes in the Spirit of the Lord is going to communicate freedom. 2 Corinthians 3:17 says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Freedom in that particular context means freedom of judging your standing with God by means of the law. Freedom to stand, fully equipped and justified by grace, through faith.

If a message comes to you that says, "There is something more you must do to be saved other than believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," if it tells you to concentrate on yourself rather than on Him, it's not in the spirit of freedom that the Lord has called us to. Even an emphasis upon faith can become an emphasis upon a work. "I know I don't have enough faith to please God, therefore, God isn't pleased with me." That becomes a substitute for the doctrine of freedom.

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Faith is a gift, not a work. God didn't give us the spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7). The Spirit is one of peace and joy, not one of bondage—the spirit of sonship. Paul indicates that the false teachers will come like a serpent. They're beguiling persons. They're slick, smooth and skilled at the microphone.

Paul says that he himself is an untrained speaker (verse 6). The word in the Greek is a root word from which we derive the English word "idiot." In those days, "idiot" didn't mean what it means now. It just meant "a lay person," as compared to a professional in a field. He's saying, "I didn't go to rhetoric school." I don't use all of the rhetorical eloquence of Greek speakers. I do have knowledge, however. Not the rhetorical flare, but knowledge, that's what counts.

Paul may not be a rhetorician, he may not be skilled at the microphone, but he has knowledge.

And sooner or later, as you listen to any person who preaches the Word of God, you're going to pick up whether there is a deep love for the Lord in their life.

I love the story William Barclay tells of the orator who recited the twenty-third Psalm. He gave it with great flourish. When he was done, he was met with great applause. It was a masterpiece of oration. Then, out of the audience, came the voice of a simple man, the quiet and silent type, who stood up and began reciting the same psalm. He did it, at the beginning, with such a halting style, but there was inattention, and even a few titters of laughter, in the audience. But as he continued through the psalm, the room grew quiet, until there was profound silence as the man of God recited the twenty-third psalm. When he was finished, and the place was in dead silence, the orator went over to the godly man and said to him, "Sir, I knew the psalm, but you knew the shepherd. And that makes all the difference in the world."

Are we sensitive to the fact that spiritual deception is continually at work in our life?

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III. The third insight that the apostle raises is in verses 7–12: What’s happening to kingdom money?

“Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about” (2 Corinthians 11:7–12, NIV).

The enemy has two plans in regard to church finances or financing the kingdom of God. One plan is to try to get God’s people to feel that they can’t afford to tithe or give to the work of the Lord. The second plan is to cause church leaders to place persons in places of administrative responsibility that fritter away kingdom funds, and it becomes an absolute disgrace for the way kingdom money is handled. And people go away saying, “They’re all a bunch of crooks.”

We can read between the lines of this passage and see what Paul is talking about, because there was mishandling of finances all the way back to the apostolic age. There were the false teachers at Corinth, living high and mighty off the gifts of widows, and he was sensitive to that, no doubt, because he had a practice of never receiving offerings from the church he was planting during the time he was planting it in an area. A church could only support him after he had left. That was in order for him to be able to say, as he led persons to the Lord, “I’m leading you to the Lord, not because I want your money; others are supporting me.” People in Macedonia would

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send him gifts, and Philippi would send him gifts and people from Ephesus would send him gifts.

There were those super-apostles who had moved into Corinth that were getting rather large love offerings from the believers at Corinth, and were saying, “The reason why we’re getting these offerings and the reason why Paul didn’t get any offerings is that everyone that speaks well gets good offerings. His poor speaking—obviously it shows. The fact that he doesn’t take any money shows that he’s embarrassed to take any money, he’s such a poor speaker.” Greeks looked down on poor rhetoricians. They would also say too, maybe, “He doesn’t receive offerings because he knows his doctrine isn’t really all that much anyway, so it’s worth what you pay for it. It’s free, and it’s worth exactly that.”

So Paul’s responding to that kind of criticism. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 9, and he upholds the principle of those who administer the Word, he doesn’t want to give these super-apostles ground for boasting, so he calls them to live at the same level he’s living at, and to serve the body of Christ for free—only living off what those from churches they have established in other places may send him. Of course, this is the basic problem with false teaching, that it’s always parasitic. False teachers are parasites in the body of Christ.

So Paul is determined to cut the ground out from under them. We need to exercise concern with kingdom resources, as to what we do with funds that belong to the Lord.

IV. The fourth and last sensitivity, the last spiritual insight in this particular passage, is this question: Do I recognize how demonic religion can be?

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Corinthians 11:13–15, NIV). Religion can be demonic.

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Paul's converts had come directly out of hedonism. They'd come directly out of temples where the worship of God involved the worship of idols behind which there were demonic spirits. They knew what it was like to come out of perverse sexual practices, so they knew what hedonism was. They had learned that Satan can horrify. What they had not learned was that he can appear to be beautiful. That Satan is not necessarily only behind the gross religions. But Satan can adopt a spiritual facet. He can look Christian and he can quote Scripture. Paul is reminding the believers of the presence of Satanic or demonic influences right in the church of Jesus Christ. He becomes very explicit in describing these false teachers. Before, he has been soft. But now he comes down hard, "Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ" (verse 13).

There are three ways to ultimately detect a false teacher. Their message will give them away, their morals will give them away, or their manner will give them away. But message, morals or manner—one of those three things will ultimately reveal demonic influence in religious teaching every time.

How sensitive are you to the prospect of deception in your own life? My source of deception, at this moment, is not in the area of doctrine or false teaching at all. I'm not at all tempted to run in any false doctrine direction. Perhaps you find yourself in a similar position. This doesn't mean that the enemy has quit working on us. If the enemy were to come to you as a beguilingly beautiful serpent or an angel of light, in what way would he manifest himself? Maybe he would appeal to you emotionally. It really feels right. If it feels so good, how can it be wrong? Maybe you can identify with me when I say that a primary way the enemy works upon me and tries to come and defeat me is by exploiting my inferiority complex. When I feel that the Spirit is birthing a direction in my mind, the enemy is there, in a sweet reasonability guise, saying, "That

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is a crackpot idea and it will never work. You'll never be able to do that." The enemy comes many times and says, "It can't be done. It's going to be a failure. It'll never happen." That's how he comes. If he can convince us, in the outset, while something is still in the idea stage, then we won't even try.

The devil wants to defeat us in our ideas. He wants to defeat us and beguile us in other ways. Maybe he's telling you today what he told Eve, "That really isn't fair—what's happening to you, what God said to you, what He's allowing to occur in your life. That's not really fair. He's not really doing what's best for you. So why don't you give up on Him and take my way instead. It'll be a lot better." How many times do we hear that voice when we're going through a hard, dark night in our life and the enemy comes along saying, "God really isn't fair, you know. He really isn't fair." That's what he said to Eve, "God isn't fair."

Maybe the unexamined life, unexamined priorities, unexamined loyalties in your life is another way that the enemy attempts to masquerade as an angel of light. I think of persons who want to live a perfect Christian life and have failed. The enemy most often uses the old tape, "Why try to live for Christ? You know you can't live the life anyway. You're just a hypocrite. You can't live it." We need to recognize where that voice comes from. The Holy Spirit is never going to say to you, "You can't live the Christian life." I'll guarantee that. And if the Holy Spirit will never say that to you, then, where does it come from? It never comes from God.

Over and over again, Paul points us to that future day, when all will be brought before God for judgment. Judgment is, by the way, the first doctrine denied by the devil. "You will not surely die if you eat this" (Genesis 3:4). And the devil is always at work to deny the prospect of judgment. But, just as at the end of chapter 10 Paul had said that there will come a day when the righteous person is commended by the Lord, so in verse 16 he announces that the servants of

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Satan, who masquerade as servants of righteousness, will also have an end which their actions will deserve. Someday, the mask will be stripped away, but the man or the woman upon whom the Lord's approval is will be commended.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You anew for Your Word, which reaches us with insight and meaning. We would ask, in this moment of prayer, that we would be wise to see again the spiritual forces that are at work in our life. The force of the enemy, that comes to a person here who does not know You personally, telling them, "You can put that off. Wait till another time." Or, "You're not really sure, are you?" How different, Lord, is Your Word. "Today is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). "This is the acceptable time of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19). "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). "He who believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Maybe others here in this congregation today are passing through moments where the curtain is drawn on the mystery of "Why?" And the enemy is saying, "A lot of thanks you got for serving God." Teach us, Lord, to discern this voice, his beguiling voice of deception, which would only turn us into utter despair, not into joy. Persons that are despairing may be here today. But how different that is from the utter despair which the enemy brings us into. We know, Lord, that in serving You, You will bring us out into the sunlight of hope, because You will prove to us that You're working all things for the good. Lord, for others in whom You are birthing ideas and ministries, the enemy will always come and try to defeat us at that stage. Give us wisdom and power to overcome him. Help us, Lord, to maintain a pure and gentle and good spirit in our lives, that makes us as harmless as we can be and yet exceedingly wise. Let Your grace and favor be upon us as we come to these closing moments of worship and

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prayer. We pray, Lord, in a very significant way, that You'll touch lives in this hour of worship.

In Jesus' name. Amen.