

SPIRITUAL BEAUTY

2 Corinthians 12:11–21

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My message today is entitled “Spiritual Beauty.” My mother used to warn my brother and I before we started dating, “Remember, beauty is only skin deep.” And my brother would say, “Who wants to date a girl without any skin?” True beauty is always inward.

As we come near the end of Paul’s defense of his apostleship, that spans all of chapters 10–13, we find, in verses 12:11–21, five marks of the spiritually beautiful life. The super-apostles, the wonder workers at Corinth, had been fostering a climate of judging by outward appearances. Their outward appearance was legalism. Their outward appearance was the manifestation of gifts. Their outer appearance was the ethereal thing, difficult to define—but they passed themselves off as spiritual people. But God sees the heart. From these verses of Paul, we see the five marks of the spiritually beautiful life.

The first such mark is verse 11 “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles,’ even though I am nothing” (2 Corinthians 12:11, NIV).

I. The first mark of spiritual beauty in this passage is a sense of confidence tempered with humility.

Paul admits that he is not in the least bit inferior to the super-apostles. He owns up to his ability. But he immediately covers it by saying, “I am nothing.” Here is a tremendous paradox. The man who in Philippians can write, “I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13), is the same man, in 2 Corinthians, who says, “I am nothing.” “I can do all things... I am nothing.” Both are needed in the beautiful life.

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We need a sense of confidence. Without a sense of confidence, we're defeated people.

Confidence is one of the three sides of the triangle of worth. A sense of self worth, a sense of identity and a sense of competence give us our drive as persons to achieve, to obtain, to be comfortable being who we are in God and with ourselves.

Alongside that sense of competence, the deep sense of humility before God.

Paul's friends at Corinth, his converts, should have defended him. They were his disciples that were known and read of all men. They should not have let the super-apostles get off with saying that Paul was an incompetent person, less than themselves. Sometimes, it's a sin for a Christian to remain silent. When someone we know and love and whose character is revered and righteous is being attacked, that is not a time to simply listen passively. Paul knew that he was in no way inferior to these super-apostles. But unlike them, he was unwilling to make a practice of boasting.

Paul said that everything he had before he came to Christ, everything he gave up for the sake of Christ, was counted as dung (Philippians 3:8). A good sense of humility alongside a sense of confidence is a mark of spiritual beauty.

II. A second mark of spiritual beauty is keeping the balance between God's work and our own.

"The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance" (2 Corinthians 12:12, NIV). Here we see that God's work through Paul involves signs, works and miracles. Notice, by the way, Paul says, "They were done among you." He doesn't say "I did them among you." But he takes the passive mood. "They were done among you." He seeks no credit for being the one to do these miracles. But the gifts of signs and wonders and miracles were accomplished through him.

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It's interesting to read the Scripture and find that the words "wonders" and "miracles" never occur by themselves, without also being accompanied by the word "signs." "Wonders" are simply meant to cause a person's mouth to gape open in astonishment. "Miracles" are tremendous deeds of God's power. But God does not do things simply to make people's mouths fall open. He does things as signs. His miraculous words are signs or windows through which we see something of His eternal nature and power. His eternal love and goodness. These are apostolic gifts that Paul had in abundance. Such signs, wonders, and miracles Paul had done in abundance at Corinth.

You perhaps do not have these apostolic gifts. It may be God's intention for you to have them, and you have sought them. Or it may be that God simply does not intend to give you these gifts. But the biblical character of all the gifts is such, that we as individual Christians are to at least have one. He gives gifts according to a measure of grace and according to our measure of faith. There are at least twenty-one spiritual gifts in the New Testament. Surely, in our work for the Lord, we need at least one. I found that in doing our work for the Lord, it's always best to be on the cutting edge, where I am out past what I can do in my own ability, and I need the special equipment and anointing of the Spirit to carry ministry off.

For you, it may be the gift of wisdom or knowledge or discernment, public tongues, interpretation, prophecy, healings, miracles, faith, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leading, showing mercy. There are many more. We are meant to function in those areas of God's work coming through us. But spiritual gifts are not medals to be worn as signs of accomplishment. They are weapons to be used in warfare. And too many times in the body of Christ, persons who had spiritual gifts began wearing them as medals of accomplishment rather than as weapons of spiritual warfare.

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We need to have God working through us. We need to have the anointing of the Spirit of God for whatever task we may have. There are some things only God can do. But there are other things God expects us to do. Paul sort of conditions the miracles by the fact that he had a responsibility. That is, to be persevering. There were times when the miracles didn't happen.

This is especially true in one incident in Acts 14 at Lystra, where a man who was crippled from birth was healed as a result of Paul's ministry. But the next moment, you find Paul being dragged out of town by an angry mob. He is pelted with rocks and left for dead. Yet he picked himself up and kept on going. Perseverance.

A model of the Christian life is: We should function with a balance between what God is doing and what our own responsibilities are.

III. A third mark of spiritual beauty that is seen in this passage: Serving and loving others without ulterior motives.

“Now were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong! [A touch of irony. Paul says, “I never accepted pay from you. Forgive me for wronging you in this manner. The super-apostles didn't wrong you, did they? They took all they could get!”] Now I am ready to visit you for the third time [Commentaries are interesting. You have whole pages devoted to what the other “two times” were], and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children [Here's where Paul made a mistake!]. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less? Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the

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same spirit and follow the same course? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening” (2 Corinthians 12:13–19, NIV).

This mark of spiritual beauty shows Paul as serving and loving others without ulterior motivation. His critics, the super-apostles, said that was impossible. “It’s impossible that he would’ve have served you without charge. He’s got something up his sleeve. He’s going to catch you with trickery.” That’s probably a phrase they use that Paul repeats here in his letter. “He’s going to yet catch you by subterfuge, by trickery.” What they were probably saying is, “See this offering that Paul is sending His emissaries to collect in the churches he founded in Asia and Macedonia and Achaia? If the truth were known, he’s getting a cut out of that offering. And he kind of softened you up by acting like he hadn’t taken anything from you. But don’t worry, he’ll make it all back in the last offering. He’s got a big percentage coming out of that one.”

Paul is having to deny it. Also, a test to the integrity of Titus and the other brother. He said that all of them were as clean as a hound’s tooth, when it came to matters of financial integrity. He defends his motives. He says he’s never had selfish interest, but is writing, instead, that the church might be strengthened. And his classic comment in the middle of this section is, “If I love you more, will you love me less?”

How many of you have found, in your life, that the more it seems you try to reach out and love someone, the more they reject you? Paul knew that. That rejection was not going to keep him from going on loving. “If I love you more, will you love me less?” He gave without restraint, asking nothing in return.

A little boy left a note by his mother’s plate at the breakfast table. The note was in the form of a bill. After he’d gone off to school, she saw the note and read it. It said, “Mowing the law: two

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dollars; drying the dishes: one dollar; raking leaves: three dollars; cleaning the garage: four dollars. Total: You owe me ten dollars.” When the little boy came home for lunch, he found his mother left him a note beside his plate and it too was in the form of a bill. It said, “Ironing clothes: nothing; mending socks: nothing; cooking meals: nothing; bandaging cuts: nothing; baking cookies: nothing. Love, Mother.” Freely you have received, freely give.

So many of you within this congregation freely give of your time to minister to others. All of us need to open ourselves to freely give, without ulterior motivations, to one another in the body of Christ and in our own families.

IV. A fourth mark of spiritual beauty is the absence of division.

“For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be [Paul would rather come not as a disciplinary father to them, but as a loving parent]. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Corinthians 12:20, NIV). Someone has called verse 20 “The marks of the unhealthy church.” I’ve been in some churches like that. When they’re present in the body of Christ, it makes for an unwholesome situation.

These eight traits are all in the plural. It doesn’t show up this way in the modern translation, but they’re all plural nouns. The older translations would read something like this: “strifes, jealousies, indignations, contentions, evil speakings, whisperings, puffing ups, commotions, disorders.” There’s a lot of it going on, that’s why they’re all in the plural. Quarrellings.

“Quarrellings” simply represent rivalry and competition. Discord about place and prestige.

Concern for who’s number one.

This may describe dissention in the body of Christ. It may describe dissention in a home even, where someone is trying to put themselves forward as number one—quarrellings, jealousies.

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“Jealousies” are the desire to have what is not ours to have. “Outbursts of anger”—sudden explosion or an outburst of passionate anger. We would use it in the colloquial sense to describe a person who blows up.

I’ve generally found that the person who is puffed up also blows up. The reason why a puffed up person blows up is that there is a lot of air in their balloons. So when their balloon gets touched, all the puffing up goes into a blow-up. There’s a great deal of relationship between anger and arrogance.

“Factions”—the word originally meant “work done for pay.” Then it came to mean “work done for no other motive than pay.” Finally it came to be used, in a symbolic sense, of a person who says, “What do I get out of this?” Factions, therefore, relate to the special interest groups who look, not to the good of the whole, but to “what do I…” or “What does our group get out of this?” and they forget what’s good for everybody else. We want our rights. We want what belongs to us. When that happens in the body of Christ, it’s deadly.

Slanders. “Slanders” are open, loudmouth attacks, public vilification. Demeaning someone else’s character and personality in public. We see a lot of this today in the political arena. “Gossip” is the underside of slander. It’s a nasty word. Unlike slander, gossip is done in secret. It is more insidious. It poisons. Gossip is simply saying anything about anyone behind their back that you’re not saying to their face. It is disclosing information about another person, whether true or untrue, that puts another person in a very bad, negative light. It is stretching details and stretching information. And it’s harmful to our own lives and harmful to the body of Christ.

“Arrogance” simply means “puffed up ones.” And “disorders” describe a person who is continually challenging everything. Not because they want to do it a better way, but because they

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simply want to do it another way. And another way is their way. Whether it is better or not—arrogances. The beautiful Christian life is absent of these qualities.

V. The fifth mark of spiritual beauty is moral purity.

“I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged” (2 Corinthians 12:21, NIV).

Obviously, spiritual beauty is meant to go alongside moral purity. There are three words that describe moral impurity in verse 21. One is simply the word “impurity,” which literally transliterated over into our language would be “without catharsis,” “without cleansing.” It describes a person in an unwashed condition morally, which keeps them out of God’s presence. Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). The amazing thing is, when we are impure in our own lives, we keep ourselves out of God’s presence. We find ourselves unable to pray or unable to open the Word or have any kind of intimate conversation with God. Impurity keeps us from God. Paul is telling these believers that there’s a way to deal with impurities. That is, even as a Christian, to repent of it. It’s striking that there are born-again believers who had committed impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery. That’s why this letter is written, to bring those believers back to a place of moral fullness.

The word for “sexual sin” is the Greek word from which we derive “pornography.” It simply describes all sexual sin, whether fornication, adultery, or homosexuality. The early Christians had to deal with sexual pressures, temptations, every bit as much as we do—if not more so.

Prostitution, for example, was a very open thing at the city of Corinth, much more even than in our society. Paul is telling these Corinthians not to fall into a trap of deception that “God knows my heart and He’ll make a special exemption for me.”

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I'm concerned, as a pastor, with what I see taking place in the body of Christ in regard to morals and ethics in our day. Many times, we slide into sexual sin and simply say, "The difference between me and the non-Christian, is I have Christ in my heart. God will understand what I'm doing. Surely, He would waive His requirements for me." But if you're going to be with anyone who is not your husband or your wife, you're committing sin in God's sight. And God asks you to stop, repent, lay that aside. And to ask Him for His cleansing, for His purity in Your life. It's up to you to determine whether you will obey God or simply obey your own instincts and urges. No matter how good it feels, if God says it is wrong, it is wrong.

"Debauchery" is the third word. It stands for those who sin with insolence. Who boast of their sin and their sexual perversion.

Spiritual beauty involves moral purity. You look at Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and you have to read between the lines to sense some complication. He had poured his life into these people, and he looked, at times, for fruit and there didn't seem to be a lot of fruit. There must have been some very frustrating moments. In the last analysis, when we look at his experience with the Corinthians through the window of time, we can see that indeed it bore good fruit and they repented, most of them, and had a real living experience with God.

All of us have only a few short years, and we need to make them count for the Lord. We can't always measure whether or not the seed we are sowing is actually bearing fruit. We can't always judge our success by the evidence that is around us. My parents established a church in the most unlikely place. They established a church in me. All that work, somehow, began to have a fruitage in their child. I saw the dedication of my parents to the work of the Lord. I never questioned their motive. I knew they were sold out for Jesus Christ 100 percent, and they gave me a reason for living for God. They gave me a measure by which to judge success.

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As I look at the Corinthian letter and read between the lines, I see some of Paul’s frustrations. I want to go up to him and say, “Brother Paul, your labor is not in vain.” I wanted to go to my folks and say, “Your labor is not in vain.” And I want to go to you and tell you, “Your labor is not in vain.” My labor is not in vain. God is going to be glorified in our life. Maybe we’ve reached a point in our life when we look around and say, “What good am I doing? What impact is my life having?” Maybe we won’t even see—maybe in your lifetime you won’t see it. But if you and I will stay faithful to God, let’s leave the results to Him. The fruit may show up in some very unlikely places, but show up, it will.

The marks of a beautiful Christian: competence tempered by humility, balance between God’s work and our own, serving and loving others without ulterior motivations, the absence of divisions and moral purity. May the Lord help us to be spiritually beautiful people.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You for these moments we spent around Your Word. We treasure these times in our life, as You build us up with Your encouragement from the Holy Spirit and from the written Scripture. I ask today especially for those who have come to this service discouraged in their life. Maybe things have not gone as they have expected. Perhaps, like my folks, what they labored for has vanished. There’s nothing physical to point to that establishes the fact that they left a monument. Lord, the world itself is coming to an end. Some day, everything that can be removed will be removed. And everything that can be shaken will be shaken. The only things that last are the things that You have anointed. That You have established through us. Give us the ease—in our spirit, when we have done our best—to rest in You. Even when we haven’t done our best, to rest in the forgiveness that You give us, that sets us free to go on and serve You without being driven by guilt. Lord, I pray for those in this sanctuary today who perhaps haven’t

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ever turned their life over to You completely. I pray that this would be a day in which their life would be opened to Your wonderful presence, for only You can make life whole. It's possible, Lord, in this service, that there would be someone who has come here with a great deal of hurt in their life—spiritual pain and spiritual hurt. Lord, You come in this moment to them and put Your arm around them and say, "I want to set you free, if you'll let Me. I'll come into your life and dwell with you and in you." I pray that, as we come to these moments of prayer, that Your Spirit would be wonderfully present. That You would encourage discouraged persons, that You would heal the sick, mend the broken heart, that You would set a captive free, that You would raise up persons to serve You and Your family, that You would be here to minister and to meet needs. We ask this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.