

“THE WORLD’S MOST HONEST RESUME”
(2 Corinthians 11:16-33)

Most of you have or will have at some time written a resume. Resume is a French word that means “to summarize,” and on a resume you summarize who you are, your background and education, your work experience, your skills and accomplishments, and whatever else you can think of that would impress a potential employer. At the end are a list of references from people you hope will say great things to say about you.

A study done in June of last year revealed that 55% of Americans admit to lying on some aspect of their resume – usually about previous work experiences or education. I’ve looked at lots of resumes over the years and have never caught anyone lying, but what a resume doesn’t tell you are the less positive traits about the person. That is usually revealed when you call their references, and good references will tell you not only the good things about the person, but their weaknesses and things they need to work on. It would be amazing and refreshing to see a resume that included flaws and weaknesses and failures – it would probably keep them from getting hired, but it would show you who they really are.

As we come to our study of 2 Corinthians this morning the Apostle Paul is going to present his resume to the Corinthian church in order to show that he is a true apostle, and defend himself against all the untrue, slanderous things have been said about him. As we’ve talked about many times, Paul started the church in Corinth five years earlier, but after he left some very powerful, influential teachers infiltrated the church and began bad-mouthing Paul. They criticized his appearance, they criticized his lack of speaking skills, they said he was weak and timid, he wasn’t trustworthy, and his poverty and suffering were signs that he didn’t live up to the image of what an apostle should look like.

In tearing Paul down, his opponents did everything possible to build themselves up. They said, “We are real apostles – we dress well, we speak well, we accept speaking fees just as the best teachers do, we have reference letters from important people, and we have a spiritual pipeline to God that Paul doesn’t have. We are the ones you should follow, not Paul.”

The congregation at Corinth hears this and they’re torn... “Is Paul really who he says he is? What these guys have to say makes a lot of sense, and they say it so persuasively.” Paul is not about to take this lying down, and beginning in chapter 10 he says he’s going to defend himself – he’s going to boast – not boasting in a prideful, arrogant way – but giving an honest summary of his life that shows that he’s a true servant of the Lord. He says he’s going to boast, but he keeps putting it off because he hates to do it – he doesn’t like talking about himself – but knows that he has to for the sake of the gospel. Now in chapter 11, verses 16-33 he begins his boast, and reveals why he is a true apostle and why they should follow him.

The application of this passage for us is two-fold: we learn what kind of teachers and leaders to follow and not follow, and we learn the kind of traits we should all strive to live by as authentic Christians.

Paul starts in verses 16-18 by once again declaring how much he detests doing what he’s about to do... “I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.”

The book of Proverbs says that when a fool speaks, do not answer them – just keep your mouth shut. But Proverbs also says there is a time and place to answer a fool, and with the gospel at stake, this is just such a time. Paul is going to become a fool, so to speak, in order to answer a fool – he’s going to do what his opponents do – he’s going to do a little boasting, just like they do. He even admits that he’s not following the example of the Lord – it’s not something Jesus would do. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that it’s not him speaking, but a fool speaking – he’s descending to the level of his enemies to expose how foolish they are, and in turn, how foolish the Corinthians are in being taken in by such fools.

In verses 19-21a Paul uses some sarcasm to expose the true resume of the false teachers... “You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!”

He says, “You guys are used to putting up with fools in the form of these false teachers, so put up with another fool for a moment.” Then he says, “These fools you’ve been putting up with are not who they claim to be – you’ve been seduced by their charm and eloquence – and here’s how...

First, he says, “You’re letting them make slaves out of you. You’re letting them control your every move.” There are churches like that, usually led by a domineering pastor. In 1 Peter 5 we read that shepherds are not to lord it over their sheep, but to lead by humble example. Spiritual leaders are to be servants, not masters.

Second, “You’re letting them exploit you, or (some translations say) devour you.” The false teachers manipulated them into giving them money, much like the Pharisees who Jesus said “devour widow’s houses.” They convince poor widows, and the most vulnerable, to give them their life savings so that they can grow richer. These false teachers did not care about people, but used them for their own selfish purposes. True spiritual leaders look after their sheep – especially those who are vulnerable – and put their needs above their own.

Third, “You’re letting them take advantage of you.” The false teachers traveled from town to town looking for gullible people to prey on. They gained the trust of people by telling them what they wanted to hear. They took advantage of that trust by controlling their lives, taking their money, and turning them against Paul.

Fourth, “You’re submitting to people who put on airs.” They acted as though they were better than everyone else, and better than they really were. They bragged about their heritage, their education, their eloquence, and the fact that they knew a lot of important people. Beware of any spiritual leader that talks about himself and exalts himself instead of Christ.

Fifth, “You’re letting them slap you in the face.” This may be figurative of verbally berating someone or embarrassing them in public. It may also be that these so-called leaders were actually backhanding a few parishioners to humiliate them. My dad served on a church board one time when another deacon raised his fist to hit another deacon before he was stopped. It happens. It’s interesting that in two different lists of elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, it says that an elder should not be violent or quick-tempered. Someone who physically or verbally abuses another person is a sign that they’re walking in the flesh and not the Spirit.

Paul wraps up his description of his opponents by laying on a thick dose of sarcasm, “To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!” “It’s shameful, isn’t it, that I’m so weak – as they say I am – that I didn’t dominate you, take all your money, and slap you in the face, please forgive me.” He wants to shake them up and get their attention.

Finally, beginning in the last part of verse 21, Paul begins his boast. He’s been talking about it and talking about it, and now he begins... “Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) (21b-23a).

Paul just can’t get over how much he dislikes what he’s doing, to the point that he says “I am out of my mind to talk like this – I’m talking like a madman.” What he first wants to establish is the fact that he is equal to his opponents in his claims to be an apostle... “If we’re using the criteria they use to prove apostleship, I can match them point by point.” The false teachers were saying, “Real apostles sent from Jesus are born and bred Jews – Jesus was Jew, and His twelve disciples were Jews.” The implication is that Paul is not really a Jew, and lacks the credentials they do.

Paul says, “Are they Hebrews? So am I.” The word “Hebrew” refers to the racial identity of Jewish people. In Philippians 3:5 Paul called himself a “Hebrew of Hebrews” – in other words, he was a full-blooded Jew. His father and mother were both Jewish – He spoke the Hebrew language – and he grew up keeping all the customs and rituals of the Jewish people. He was a Hebrew through and through.

“Are they Israelites? So am I.” To be an Israelite was considered a privileged position as belonging to God, receiving the law and the covenants, having access to the temple, and being given the promises of the coming Messiah. Paul was as Israelite as you can get. In Philippians 3 Paul said he was born of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the most respected tribes of Israel. Not only that, but Paul was a Pharisee, a select, elite group that kept the law down to its smallest detail.

“Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I.” This was yet another way for Paul to say he was equal to his opponents and could list as many qualifications in his pedigree as they could. As a descendant of Abraham he was circumcised on the eighth day and made an heir of the covenant.

Paul used to pride himself in being a Jew and son of Abraham – it used to mean everything to him – but he says in Philippians 3, after listing all his credentials... “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:7-8). All of the credentials he so highly valued, meant nothing to him now. He knows now that being a good Jew merits nothing – from now on his life was all about Christ and serving Him.

After showing that he is equal to the false teachers, in verse 23 he transitions to the thing he really wants to boast about – and that is how he is superior to the false teachers. This is where you’d expect him to fill his resume with achievements and accomplishments, and say... “I have superior education – I was trained under one of the top rabbis of the first century, Gamaliel – I know the Old Testament backwards and forwards – I’ve traveled all over the world – I’ve led countless evangelistic outreaches – I’ve started twelve churches – I’ve discipled and trained numerous leaders – and I’ve met with governors and rulers and other very important people.”

He could have said all of this and it would all be true, but he doesn't. Instead, he talks about his sufferings, his losses, his shame, and his defeats. All in all, Paul is going to list over 30 things that happened to him as a result of being a true apostle – and by the time he's done there will be no doubt who the real apostle is. As we go through the list, compare it to the way we so often evaluate spiritual leaders in America by their appearance, charisma, strength, eloquence, and popularity. The real test is: Are they willing to suffer for the name of Jesus? Do they humbly serve the needs of people even when service comes at a high personal cost? Do they persevere in serving the Lord even when there is no earthly gain?

He begins with a long list of sufferings and adversity faced as an ambassador for Christ... “Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, 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 bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

Paul's point is: Have these false teachers you're so enamored by, have they been through what I've been through? Have they sacrificed what I've sacrificed to bring you the gospel? Do they bear the scars that come with being a true servant of Christ? The answer is no because they follow a different Jesus – not the Jesus who suffered, who was humiliated, and went to the cross. They avoid persecution and suffering by telling people what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. They consider suffering a sign of weakness and proof that you're not spiritual elite like they are.

Yet Jesus said that suffering comes with the territory of representing Him. John 15:18-20a says, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

The ironic thing about Paul is that he had once been the one persecuting followers of Christ, and was on his way to do so when he was dramatically saved on the road to Damascus. After God appointed him to be an apostle, He said, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” That could be said of any true servant of the Lord – we are called to suffer. When we understand that we are called to suffer it gives us a realistic perspective of life – we don't expect everything to go swimmingly in this life – we accept the good and the bad, knowing that this life is temporary and we are called to go all out for the Lord while we're here, knowing that we will be richly rewarded in the next life for our faithful service to Him.

Let's briefly take a look at Paul's resume of suffering and learn what a true servant of the Lord looks like...

- “I have worked much harder.” The ministry is work, and in 1 Thessalonians 2:9 Paul says he worked night and day to preach the gospel to people. Jesus emphasized that we only have a short amount of time to do God's work on earth. He said, “Work for the night is coming We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4).

- “I have been in prison more frequently.” Paul was in jail a lot – at least seven times that we read about. One person quipped that whenever he entered a city, he asked about the accommodations of the jail, because there was a good chance he’d be spending the night there for preaching the gospel.
- “I have been flogged more severely.” Paul was beat up a lot – as he will detail in these verses. You can imagine how torn up and disfigured his body was, not to mention the daily pain he lived with.
- “I have been exposed to death again and again.” Paul life was always on the brink of death, but he lived unafraid. His philosophy was: “To live is Christ, and to die is gain. If God wants me to keep preaching the gospel, I’ll do so gladly – if I’m killed for preaching the gospel, I’ll be with the Lord. Either way I’m good.”
- “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.” Forty lashes minus one was a unique Jewish punishment given for blasphemy, and it was extremely painful and extremely humiliating. The thinking was that if someone was hit with a lash forty times they may not survive, so they would do 39. The flogging with start with lashes to the chest, and then they’d turn you around and hit your back. It’s hard to imagine going through five floggings and receiving 195 lashes. When would you have thought: I have the wrong occupation? When would you start to wonder: Is this really God’s will for me? If they had beat you once, would you keep preaching? Maybe. What about twice, or three times, would you keep coming back? Paul keeps coming back because of his love for lost people – he was willing to put his life on the line so that people could hear the gospel.
- “Three times I was beaten with rods.” This beating was carried out by the Gentiles for those who disturbed the peace. Paul was not a rabble-rouser, but whenever the gospel penetrates the darkness there is going to be conflict and the peace will be disturbed.
- “Once I was pelted with stones.” That happened in Lystra where an angry mob dragged Paul outside the city and stoned him to the point that they thought he was dead.
- “Three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day on the open sea.” In his travels Paul boarded lots of ships, and because ships were fragile and navigation was poor in the ancient world, shipwrecks were common. One time he spent 24 hours out on the waves clinging to a piece of wreckage before he was rescued. After one experience like this, you’d probably stay off boats, but if boats were the best way to take the gospel from point A to point B, Paul was game.
- “I have been constantly on the move.” Traveling in ancient times – whether by land or sea – was hazardous, and Paul mentions eight specific threats that became standard fare for him and his missionary team.
- “I have been in danger from rivers.” With few, if any, bridges in the first century, travelers were forced to cross rivers, not always knowing how deep or swift they were.
- “I have been in danger from bandits.” Travelers in the ancient world had to be on constant lookout for bandits hiding along roads, much like in the story of the Good Samaritan.
- “I have been in danger from my fellow Jews.” Jews would follow Paul from town-to-town plotting to kill him for proclaiming Jesus as the Jewish Messiah – just as they plotted to kill Jesus.

- “I have been in danger from Gentiles.” Opposition came at him from every direction.
- Where Jews and Gentiles encompasses all people, the next three items – danger in the city, danger in the country, danger at sea – covers every geographical region. Paul was never safe – whether he was in large cities or the countryside or on the sea, his life was always in danger.
- “I was in danger from false believers.” It did not just receive opposition from Jews and Gentiles, but from those who claimed to be brothers in Christ. In 1 Timothy he talks about believers in Asia who deserted him. He singles out a person named Demas who deserted him because he loved the world.
- In verse 27 Paul mentions several hardships he brought on himself for the sake of the gospel... “I have labored and toiled and often gone without sleep.” Some think he did his gospel ministry during the day and worked as a tentmaker at night, which explains why he had many sleepless nights – it wasn’t because of insomnia, it was because he often didn’t have time for sleep or he was on the run from enemies trying to kill him.
- “I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food.” There were also times he went hungry because he was on the move or because he was low on funds.
- “I have been cold and exposed.” At the end of his life, in 1 Timothy 4:13, he told Timothy to bring him a coat because he was cold. While the false teachers were charging large fees and living in luxury, Paul was living far below the poverty line.
- Verse 28 says... “Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” Even with floggings and hunger and shipwrecks, Paul’s biggest form of suffering was the burden he carried as a pastor for his people. His anxiety was not about enduring another imprisonment or beating, but was for the spiritual wellbeing of the people he loves. Two concerns weighed heavy on his heart...

First, in verse 29 he asks... “Who is weak, and do I not feel weak?” Paul is concerned about believers not having the spiritual strength and perseverance to overcome the trials and temptations of life.

Paul’s second concern is that believers are not led into sin. Verse 29b says... “Who is led into sin, and do I not inwardly burn?” As their spiritual father, Paul burns with righteous indignation against anyone who take advantage of naïve sheep and cause them to sin. Paul models for us the kind of church that passionately cares about people and feels burdened for their spiritual health.

In verse 30 Paul sums up his resume by saying... “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” Where Paul’s opponents boasted in their strengths and accomplishments, Paul boasts in his weaknesses and suffering – which he will talk more about in chapter 12 where he says that God’s power comes upon those who are weak and humble, and it is through weakness that we become strong.

Paul ends in verses 31-33 by describing an event right after he was converted that shattered his pride and epitomized the life of suffering and humility to which God called him... “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.”

Paul had set out for the city of Damascus to hunt down Christians, but he left the city being the one hunted. Once highly esteemed in elite Jewish circles as a devout Pharisee, Paul had to sneak out of the city like a criminal, lowered in a basket from a window. It was the beginning of the kind of life Paul would live from that point on – a life not of power and prestige and earthly glory, but a life of weakness and humiliation that was in keeping with Jesus who said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

May each of us be building a spiritual resume that boasts in weakness and reflects a life that is willing to suffer for the name of Christ, and be faithful to the end of life to serve Christ no matter what happens to us. You and I will likely never face all that Paul did, but may we have his same spirit, his same tenacity, his same dedication in the difficult days we face now and face in the future.