

The Criteria Upon Which Apostolic Boasting Rests
2 Corinthians 10:12
Part One

We are now ready to return to our study of 2 Corinthians. And what is the fundamental issue that is stake as Paul wrote this epistle? The fundamental issue that was at stake as Paul wrote this epistle was the gospel itself as it had been preached by Paul and had been embodied by Paul among the Corinthians.

So how had this come about? How had the gospel, as preached by Paul and embodied by Paul, become threatened? First of all, false apostles had infiltrated the church and had begun to preach and to embody a different gospel than the gospel that Paul had preached and that Paul had embodied. And secondly, those very self-same so-called apostles, who were preaching and embodying a different gospel, also were very aggressive in attacking Paul in an attempt to diminish him in the eyes of the Corinthian church. This is how the gospel had become threatened.

So how had Paul's opponents sought to diminish Paul in the eyes of the Corinthians? They did it in numerous ways. They diminished his appearance. They diminished his speech. They diminished his reputation, and they even diminished the significance of his suffering, actually implying that all that he had suffered in the cause of Christ and in the advancement of the gospel of Christ among the Gentiles was actually beneath the dignity of a true apostle.

These were just some of the ways that they sought to diminish Paul in the eyes of the Corinthians. And why did they do this? They did it so Paul's claim of having been given apostolic authority might be discredited while their claim of possessing such authority might be embraced.

So in light of what was at stake in Paul's ongoing conflict with his opponents he had no other alternative than to defend himself and his apostleship against these attacks.

Now earlier in the epistle Paul had been defending himself and his apostleship to the Corinthian congregation as a whole, addressing both the repentant and unrepentant. But beginning in **2 Corinthians 10** through **2**

Corinthians 13 Paul has begun to address his remarks only to unrepentant and those false apostles that continued to hold sway over them.

So, what have we seen so far in this particular context? First of all, we have seen Paul's warfare on behalf of his apostolic authority in **2 Corinthians 10:1-6**, and secondly, we have seen the purpose of apostolic authority as explained by Paul in **2 Corinthians 10:7-11**. In other words, we will be moving on to **2 Corinthians 10:12-18**.

So, what did Paul seek to communicate to the Corinthians within this new section of Scripture? Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:12-18 sought to communicate to the unrepentant as well as to those who held sway over them the criteria upon which apostolic boasting rests.

So, what is the first criterion? Those possessing true apostolic authority will not boast improperly (2 Corinthians 10:12).

So, what does this mean? Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 10:12**. **“For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.”** So let us now look at this verse a little bit more carefully and we will begin with the very first words.

“For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves.”

So how should this statement by Paul, that he would not be so bold to class or to compare himself with those who commend themselves, be understood? Paul's statement that he would not be so bold as to class or compare himself with those who commend themselves should be understood as an ironic statement. In other words, Paul's words on the surface might have appeared to be speaking of something positive about his opponents, but the reality was his words were not speaking of something positive but rather of something quite negative. So, what was this negative thing that Paul communicated through his ironic statement about his opponents?

The apostle, through his ironic statement, communicated to his readers that though he was bold he was unwilling to be as bold as his opponents in

engaging in an unacceptable form of self-commendation.

So, what is the difference between a self-commendation that is acceptable and a self-commendation that is unacceptable?

Self-commendation that is based on God's standards and intended to exalt God is acceptable, but self-commendation that is not based God standards and not intended to exalt God is unacceptable. So there we have it: the difference between a self-commendation that is acceptable and a self-commendation that is unacceptable.

So where can we find in the Scriptures an example of an acceptable expression of self-commendation or an acceptable expression of boasting?

An acceptable expression of self-commendation based on God's standards and intended to exalt God can be found in 2 Corinthians 1:12. So now let me read this verse for you. **“For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.”** So who is speaking here? Paul is speaking. And is he commending himself? Absolutely!

But even though he was commending himself to the Corinthians, his self-commendation was certainly acceptable. Why? It was acceptable because his self-commendation offered up in his apostolic defense was not based on his standards of measurement but upon God's standards of measurement and was not intended for his exaltation but for God's exaltation.

So let us now look at this verse more carefully and see if this is not so. First of all, we need to understand as we begin to examine this verse that Paul's integrity as an apostle of Christ was under attack by his opponents in Corinth. And Paul was now responding to that attack.

So how did Paul do that? He appealed to his conscience. Isn't this exactly what we see Paul doing at the very beginning of this verse? Absolutely! What did he say? **“For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience.”** So did Paul, while under attack by his opponents, appeal to his conscience? Absolutely!

So why would this have been so important to Paul? If his conscience when under attack was not able to testify to the fact of his innocence, then he would have stood condemned in our own eyes no matter what others might have believed about him or said about him. This is why Paul in his defense felt it was important to begin by speaking of his conscience.

And what did he say about his conscience? **“For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience [now here it comes], that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in this world, and especially toward you.”**

So, what was the conclusion of Paul’s conscience as it sat in judgment upon Paul’s conduct? Its conclusion was that Paul’s conduct in this world and especially toward the church at Corinth was conducted in holiness and godly sincerity.

So, what did Paul mean when he said that his conscience had concluded that his conduct in the world had been conducted **“in holiness?”** The word “holiness” (HAGIOTES) refers to moral purity. When Paul said that his conscience had concluded that his conduct was in holiness, he was in effect saying that his conscience had concluded that all of his conduct was morally pure based on what he believed to be God’s personal standards of righteousness.

Wow? What an amazing statement! But why would I say this? I would say this because I would have to assume that Paul’s understanding of God’s personal standards or righteousness would have been far beyond mine and therefore his conscience would have been holding him to a far higher standard than mine, but even so his conscience concluded what? It concluded that all his conduct in the world and among the Corinthians had been done in holiness, or in other words in moral purity.

But this was not all that Paul’s conscience had concluded. Paul’s conscience had also concluded based on **verse 12** that his conduct had been done in **“godly sincerity.”**

So, what is the significance of this phrase? The word “sincerity” (EILIKRINEIA) is combination of two Greek words, one meaning “sunlight” and the other meaning “to judge.” It pictures something held up to

the light of the sun for inspection.

When Paul's conscience held up his conduct in the world and among the Corinthian church to the light of God's personal standards of righteousness as Paul understood them, no cracks were detected. In other words, Paul's conscience found him to be innocent or sincere in every matter of his life. This was just another way of emphasizing the holiness of Paul's conduct, or in other words just another way of driving home the point that his conscience had found him morally pure.

But Paul didn't just say that his conscience had found his conduct in the world to have been done **"in holiness"** and **"sincerity,"** he also said that his conscience had found his conduct to have been done in holiness and godly sincerity. This word "godly" is important.

Paul called his sincerity godly because God was its object and its source (1 Corinthians 15:10; Colossians 1:29). And why would Paul want the Corinthians to know this? Paul wanted the Corinthians to know the object and source of his sincerity was God so that the Corinthians would understand that no credit should go to him. This is why the word "godly" was so important.

Paul drives this point home even further when he after speaking of **"godly sincerity"** went on to say **"not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God."**

So why did Paul take no credit for his conscience, having concluded that all his conduct in the world and among the Corinthians had been done in holiness in godly sincerity? He took no credit because he understood that anything accomplished by him was only through the grace of God.

This was a common theme of Paul's throughout his epistles. Listen to what Paul said in **1 Corinthians 15:10. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."** And now let us listen to what Paul said in **Colossians 1:29. "For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me"** So who gets the credit for Paul's conscience being able to testify that all his conduct in this world and among the Corinthians was

done in holiness and in sincerity? God's grace should get the credit.

So did Paul commend himself in **2 Corinthians 1:12**? Yes, he commended himself. And was his self-commendation in **2 Corinthians 1:12** acceptable? Absolutely! And why was it was it acceptable? It was acceptable because his self-commendation was based on God's standards and intended to exalt God.

But the same could not be said about Paul's opponents, for they unlike Paul indulged in a kind of self-commendation that was unacceptable.

So where can we find an example of this? An unacceptable expression of self-commendation or in other words boasting can be found in **2 Corinthians 10:12**. So now let us continue to read this verse and see if this is not so. **“For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves [there is the ironic statement and now Paul will explain the irony]; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.”**

Paul's opponents were commending themselves but they shouldn't have been. For they had not met the criteria that would have made their self-commendation, or in other words their boasting acceptable. So, what was their problem?

Rather than looking to God for a standard of measure by which they could measure themselves, they measured themselves by themselves.

What does the verse say? **“They measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves.”** The self-commendation of Paul's opponents was based not on God's standards of measurement but on their own standards as measured by themselves.

In other words, they looked at themselves and determined that they were the apostolic prototype and then measured themselves by themselves. Therefore in their minds there was no way that they would not view themselves as apostles and conversely there was no way that could ever view Paul as an apostle, or in other words he, in their eyes, could never measure up to them.

So could any of us to the same thing? Could we begin to measure us by

ourselves? Absolutely! We could do this very easily. In other words, we could determine ourselves to be what a perfect father looks like, or a perfect mother, of a perfect child, or a perfect friend might look like. And what might that lead to? It could very easily lead us to exalting ourselves while putting others down.

May God give us the grace to see ourselves as God sees us and to measure ourselves as God would measure us to the praise of His glory.