



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

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2 Corinthians 10:10 "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.'"

The critics were on the loose in Corinth. They were wagging their tongues and not thinking with their heads. Jab after jab, they were trying to discredit Paul. They were on him because he was not one of the "original" apostles. Our verse is yet another powerful punch to Paul's reputation. The way he writes and the way he is in presence are not the same. To be blunt, he's "unimpressive and his speech contemptible." Other translations are more blunt. They say, "his speech amounts to nothing." All of this was being said to claim that Paul was a coward. Far away, in a letter, he seems bold and confident, but face to face, he backs down and is yellow. All of this was being done to distort and take away from what Paul had written to the brethren. These critics were chipping away at the accomplishments that Paul had made among the brethren. The critics were jealous of Paul. Did this have an impact? It did. Much of 2 Corinthians becomes a defense of those attacks against him. Earlier in the book Paul admits that he was depressed.

Paul puts his life's story up for all to see. He is ashamed of nothing as an apostle. His work speaks for itself. The critics have nothing to compare. His love for the Lord, his amazing work shows that these false brethren were wrong in what they were saying.

All of this brings us to a couple of important thoughts:

First, anyone can poke jabs at someone else. Just saying things doesn't make it so. Even though these things were false, they hurt. Our words hurt. The old expression about sticks and stones and words never hurting is not true. Our words cut deeply. Some can be ruined by the words of others. It is said that the amazing singer, Karen Carpenter, who died from heart failure as a result of anorexia, was deeply bothered by a newspaper critic who claimed she was fat. That crushed her and stuck with her. Words hurt. We can say things in haste, in anger and without thinking that we really do not mean. We can hear just part of the story and assume we know everything. The words of a parent, a teacher, a mentor, a critic and even a fellow Christian can shape and change a person for the worse. This was exactly what these false brethren were doing in Corinth. They couldn't touch Paul's message, so they attacked the messenger. They ridiculed him. They made false claims about him. All of this was done so the Corinthian Christians would stop listening to Paul. The same still happens today. It may be a co-worker. It may come from a family member. They do not know enough about the Bible to counter your message. What you say may be so factual and right that there is no room for arguing, at least not with the message.

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So, instead, they start picking apart your life. They try to show that you are not what you claim to be. They look for inconsistencies in your life so they can add the hypocrite label on you. You are watched like a hawk. Every word, every action-just to show that you are "not such a great Christian."

These things hurt. They always do. One must remain faithful to the Lord. One must not allow the critics to change you. In some settings, the atmosphere can become so toxic and hostile that you may have to leave. But with Paul as an example, we must remember that what we are doing is right and true. It's easier for those who do not agree to attack the messenger than it is for them to change their lives. They may even know that you are right, but they won't admit that nor will they do much about that.

We remember that the Lord suffered, leaving an example for us to follow. Peter reminds us that Jesus committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth. He uttered no threats. He did not revile in return. He kept entrusting Himself to God. That's what we must do.

Second, what is impressive to critics is often shallow, showy and of little value. Naaman had this concept. He was expecting a grand show in his healing. He arrived at the prophets house with "horses and chariots." He brought a lot of people. This was going to be impressive. Instead, the prophet didn't even see him. A servant came. A servant. And the message the servant brought was to go down to the Jordan River and dip seven times. That's not impressive. That's rather embarrassing. Naaman was furious.

Folks get furious today. They go to church looking for a show. They want lights, sound, comedy, skits, food, and a whole lot of fun. Fill the house with this kind of show. But when a gospel preacher shows up, he preaches the word of God. It's a sermon. It's not impressive. There is no smoke. There is no lasers. The preacher wants the audience to think. They don't want to think. He wants them to look at their lives. They don't want to look at their lives. The preacher talks about Jesus and commitment. The audience doesn't want that. So, they leave. They leave unimpressed. They leave and many will never come back.

I felt this way yesterday. I preached a funeral for one of our members. She was a dear lady. She was faithful to the core. Her family are not believers. Our folks came. It was great to see them. They are so encouraging and helpful. As I was trying to show what great faith this woman had, the thought came to me about our verse today. For her family, they didn't know the difference between a prophet, priest or a Disney prince. It was probably the first time some of them ever heard Bible verses being read. The thought of your eternal destiny probably never entered their minds. I'm sure they walked away thinking, "this wasn't very impressive." I walked away wondering who will be called when it's their funeral?

Impressive-we must be careful that we do not judge a sermon based upon the "Wow" factor. Earlier this week, I got to hear one of my heroes preach. He's old. He's well in his 80's. He stumbled a couple of times in his thoughts and speech, but what he said was so amazing. He made the sermon on the mount come alive. He just stood there through his sermon. No powerpoint. No flashy stuff. For the world, how boring and how dull. The world would not be impressed. But to those of faith, this was the master craftsman who truly understood the Lord. It was amazing. It was impressive. It filled hearts. It gave hope.

We must be careful about what draws us and impresses us spiritually. There are just a few occasions when Jesus marveled. A few people really caused Jesus to pause and notice. And each time it was the same thing. It was faith. Jesus was impressed with faith. A Gentile woman who only asked for the crumbs of miracles to help her demon possessed daughter. A Roman soldier who felt unworthy for Jesus to come to his house, wanted the Lord to heal his crippled servant. Faith. Impressive faith.

The critics of Corinth were not impressed with Paul. God was. We must not fall for Satan's attempt for us to only look at the outside of the package, while dismissing the inside. Impressed with what is said. Impressed with faithfulness. Impressed with God. The critics of Corinth were so fixed on Paul that they failed to see Christ in his life and in his message. The critics are the ones' who stand unimpressed by Heaven.

There are lessons to be learned in this.

Roger Shouse