

Deeply Devoted to a Dangerous Mission

2 Corinthians 11:21-30 • July 21, 2019 • Pentecost 6



It was fifty years ago from yesterday that the first moon landing took place. Think about what it took to be one of those first moon lander astronauts. It wasn't just a job. They were taking the biggest risk of their lives. They were in danger of the rocket failure at launch. In danger from any miscalculations during the mission. In danger from the unknown amounts of radiation. They were in danger from any system failure such as oxygen or pressure loss. They were in danger of burning to a crisp in the return into the earth's atmosphere at 24,000 miles an hour. If they slowed down too much they would crash, but if they slowed down too little they would burn up. The mission was so dangerous their families couldn't obtain life insurance. Instead they all signed a bunch of letters so their families could sell their autographs after they died. The president already had a draft speech ready in case they all died. And it doesn't seem like they were in it to just get rich. The mission cost around 24 billion, but Armstrong received only about \$33 dollars' worth of his salaried pay during the two hours and forty minutes he walked on the moon. If he had to pay for the spacesuit that he was wearing it would have cost him twelve years of his salary. For them it was all or nothing with 100% dedication to the mission. It was such a feat that some still contend that it all was a hoax. I'm guessing Buzz Aldrin didn't think he'd have anything left to prove when someone called him a coward and fraud several decades after the moon landing. At the age of 72 Aldrin ended up punching a moon-landing denier who was provoking him.

Every astronaut, I'm sure, is deeply dedicated to their mission. Today we consider someone who was even more dedicated to a far more dangerous mission. Despite that, the apostle Paul was once under attack from people who asserted he wasn't really an apostle. In 2 Corinthians 11 he defends his authenticity by listing what it really takes to be a servant of Christ. And just what does it take? We see how servants of Christ are deeply devoted to a dangerous mission.

False teachers had started to take over the Church at ancient Corinth. These men apparently thought pretty highly of themselves. And in order to boast about themselves they tore down the apostle Paul. So, Paul, out of deep concern for the Corinthian Christians had to respond. He considers boasting like the false prophets to be absolute foolishness. But he decides to beat them at their own game.

He starts by tearing down the false teachers' pedestals. They considered themselves to be of the best pedigree. False teacher's today will do the same. They'll boast about their university degree, their doctorate, or their best-selling books. They are more concerned about success than service. Paul easily matches all the false apostles in this part of their foolish boasting game. "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I."

Then Paul gets to the real heart of the matter. It doesn't matter what bloodline you come from. What matters is who you serve. "Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder." Notice Paul turns the argument of boasting on its head. To serve Christ isn't to find success and accolades from everyone. To serve Christ is work hard and face many losses, sufferings, and hardships.

The Corinthians knew Paul worked harder. Unlike the false apostles he chose to not receive any support from the Corinthians. Instead he worked as a tentmaker to support himself so that no one could claim he was in it for the money. Paul didn't have to do this, but he chose to for the sake of serving Christ. He worked harder than any false teacher. "I been in prison more frequently." What did these 'super-apostles' know about imprisonment for serving Christ? Paul had been imprisoned often. And with that he also faced beatings. "I been flogged more severely."

Then he adds, "I and been exposed to death again and again" and goes on to describe how. "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one." This was the limit that the Jews would whip someone in corporal punishment. Forty lashes of a five-pronged leather whip were considered enough to kill someone. Paul took the dozen or so wound and scar creating lashes to the chest, then the other 27 or so on the back. It would have brought him to excruciating pain and nearly bleeding to death or dying of infection. This he faced five times by this point in his ministry. He would have had many scars to prove it. "Three times I was beaten with rods." This was a Roman punishment. We read of one of these three rod beatings in Acts. He was beaten at Philippi, publicly put on display and beaten –to set an example and make him be silenced. "Once I was stoned." On his first missionary journey, Paul came to a town called Lystra. There the Jews rounded up a hostile crowd that pelted him with stones and dragged him outside the city. We read in Acts they left him there "thinking he was dead." He no doubt felt dead. "Three times I was shipwrecked." He traveled the seas a lot, and they didn't have commercial diesel vessels with steel hulls back then. "I spent a night and a day in the open sea."

To be a servant of Christ, to be an apostle 'sent out.' That means Paul traveled much. "I have been constantly on the move." Travel today is often quite fun. You can get a hotel, a plane or bus, a cushioned seat, a taxi if needed. You can stop by a restaurant or convenience store if you feel the need to catch a bite. But for Paul this meant pain and hardship. "I have been in danger from rivers, (you'd have to cross them, even when a bridge isn't there) in danger from bandits, (remember the parable of the good Samaritan? It was taken from their reality of roadside bandits) in danger from my own countrymen, (many of the Jews didn't like him!) in danger from Gentiles; (they didn't care for him!) in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. You think con-artists are dangerous today?

Imagine the number of con artists taking advantage of people in the early Christian church! And instead of travel comforts, he faced the pains that went with travel. "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."

And he gave more than his body, he gave his all including his heart and soul. "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" As a servant of Christ, he wasn't like the self-proclaimed super apostles who had no concern for God's church. "Besides everything else" the Greek could be paraphrased to mean here, "the real suffering is this: my concern for all the churches. If any of them is weak, I feel it! If any of them is stumbling into sin, I have deep concern!"

Being a servant of Christ calls for complete dedication – being invested with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. What had these false teachers faced for serving Christ? We read that they were lording it over the Corinthians and even slapping them in the face! Paul isn't really even comparing himself to them. He didn't even consider them servants of Christ. To serve Christ would mean all or nothing. They were on the nothing side. A few verses earlier we actually see Paul saying they were serving Satan.

Servants of Christ are measured by their devotion in the face of difficulties and dangers, not by the power they pretend to wield or the high worldly honors they grasp. They are so mission-minded they are not deterred even by death. Consider then how we might measure up as servants of Christ. Are we willing to be so deeply dedicated to Christ's mission that we'd face great difficulties and dangers? You probably won't run into travel dangers while trying to spread the gospel. But what small struggles might deter you from worship? Paul traveled by foot for months to get to a church. How much is too much discomfort to travel for worship? Two hours by car, ten minutes? We don't always willingly endure physical discomfort to serve Christ. Compare the small things we consider discomforts to the things that wouldn't stop Paul. Who can boast of being a servant like Paul? He was so dedicated that no danger or discomfort would dissuade him!

And are we willing to take on the emotional burdens of serving Christ? We're perhaps willing to greet others, but are we always willing to bear their burdens? Do we always let our hearts go out to fellow believers at church? Do we respond with a deep love and concern when someone stumbles into sin? When do you draw the line and act out of concern? Do you do it daily? Do you have daily concern for all the members *in all the churches* you know? For Paul it was all or nothing. Either you are emotionally concerned and suffer with God's people, or you don't. We might say we sometimes are moved with a little concern. But what is a half-concern? Who would boast of that?

I don't live up to Paul's great dedication. I'll let you decide if you can beat his boasting. But Paul doesn't play the boasting game to build himself up. He does so to redirect the stumbling Corinthians to see what it meant to serve Christ. Few have ever matched Paul in dedication in the face of danger, but all who serve Christ must follow in his steps.

Paul knew it was foolish to boast about suffering for his mission because Christ alone was outstanding in his dedication to his mission. Though in his very nature the Son of God, Christ became a man who Isaiah described as "familiar with sorrows." He faced bodily disfigurement and beatings. He faced false teachers who said he was a nobody. He faced the devil's attacks and temptations to quit. He was born with such a purpose. His mission was all about enduring suffering for the sake of others. He freely and willingly faced great bodily sufferings for us. Jesus' very life included hardship for the sake of serving others. Jesus' very death was to serve others by carrying out the sufferings that we deserved on the cross.

And Jesus was emotionally dedicated to his mission for us. When God's house of prayer was misused zeal consumed him. He cried when others cried. His heart went those lost in sin's struggle. He gave all himself -body heart and soul- for all of us. He was more devoted than we could ever be. And he suffered emotional distress like no other. His spirit cried out as he was forsaken by God. He faced the torments of hell on the cross. He was devoted to facing it all to give us something wonderful: the way, the truth, and life. Through his sufferings we now have eternal life, comfort, and healing from pain.

Only once so far has NASA gone on record to respond directly to a moon landing denier when they challenged the moon landing as real. They simply posted a photograph from the surface of the moon and wrote, "yes, we did." By faith we hold to a different and far greater mission as accomplished. We know Jesus really did accomplish his mission. He showed his hands to the eyewitnesses. His eyewitnesses were dedicated to the point of death. They were deeply dedicated because they knew his mission was accomplished, our sins paid for, our Lord alive forever.

We too know our Lord's deep devotion and victory for us! Take heart knowing that Christ came to face all weaknesses so that we would be called his servants. His mission was accomplished! He has suffered all in your place to pay for your sins. This means the real danger; the real sufferings are forever gone. The devil and false teachers may seek to stop or dissuade you. But you and now share the same new life, same forgiveness, same promises, and same heart toward others that Paul shared. Our mission is more than worth it whatever we may struggle against.

Now we like Paul, live devoted in body and heart out of concern for God's church. Knowing Christ's deep devotion to his mission for us makes us devoted to serving the mission of Christ to spread his good news. We endure all things to point all people to the new freedom and life that is ours through faith in Christ. Though we will face many dangers, difficulties, and distress, we share Christ and his kingdom. To that mission may we remain deeply devoted.