



PART 2

PAUL IN CORINTH: LEADERSHIP UNDER FIRE

Chapter Eight

A LEADER MADE OF CLAY

The false teachers in Corinth may have been personal acquaintances of the apostle Paul. At the very least, they had observed his ministry from a close vantage point. Somehow, they had become thoroughly familiar with his personality, his mannerisms, his looks, and his preaching style.

How do we know that? Their assault against Paul included the most savage kind of personal attack imaginable. They itemized all his personal defects. They denigrated him for his physical imperfections, his human weaknesses, the way he looked, and the way he spoke. In [2 Corinthians 10:10](#), Paul himself quoted some of the defamatory things the false teachers were saying about him: **“His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.”**

2 Corinthians 10:10 (NASB)

¹⁰“For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.”

Physically, it seems, the apostle Paul was not an imposing person. He was by all accounts unimpressive, perhaps even unbecoming. Paul himself knew he was anything but stunning in appearance. In fact, he made so much of his own physical unloveliness that some have even suggested he was a short hunchback with eyes so deformed that it was hard to look at him.

That may be reading too much into the biblical account of Paul’s description of himself, but he did indicate in [Galatians 4:14–15](#) that he suffered from a physical affliction that apparently had something to do with his eyes. He thanked the Galatians for not loathing or shunning him because of this physical malady:

Galatians 4:14-15 (NASB)

¹⁴“And that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*.”

¹⁵ Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.”

Whether he was describing a temporary sickness or a permanent deformity is not fully clear. But Paul indicated in [verse 13](#) that this affliction was the providential reason he had first preached the gospel in Galatia, so I am inclined to think it was a temporary illness he had gone there to seek treatment for.

Galatians 4:13 (NASB)

¹³ “But you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time.”

What is crystal-clear from the totality of Paul’s writings, however, is that he often suffered hardships and ailments that were related to his own physical weakness. He was by no means a striking example of bodily splendor or a paragon of physical stamina.

The false apostles in Corinth had added Paul’s physical defects to the long list of things they claimed made him unfit for leadership. Paul was unpopular, they said, because he lacked personal charisma. He was too homely. He did not have the physical stature, strength, and appealing persona necessary to command people. That, they claimed, was the very reason he wrote a letter to the Corinthians rather than visiting them personally.

They also impugned him as a preacher. They said his speech was “**contemptible**” ([2 Corinthians 10:10](#)).

2 Corinthians 10:10 (NASB)

¹⁰ “For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.”

That may have been a comment on the sound and tenor of his voice, his rhetorical and oratorical skills, his style of delivery, the academic level of his content—or all of the above. Of course, Paul had already acknowledged that the preaching style he brought to Corinth was purposely devoid of artificial refinements and philosophical sophistication ([1 Corinthians 2:1–2](#)).

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 (NASB)

¹ “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.”

But the false apostles portrayed that as something negative, so determined were they to diminish the Corinthians’ estimation of their spiritual father. They claimed Paul’s appearance and style were so poor and blemished that he had become a detriment to the gospel message.

It was probably true that Paul didn’t try to impress anyone with his cleverness, his intellect, or his looks. Whatever lies the false apostles had spread about Paul, on this point they were surely right: Nothing about his style or appearance contributed any power to his message. So they tried to turn that into an excuse to mock and scorn him.

It was an **ugly, impertinent, hurtful, embarrassing, and unduly personal attack** on a noble man. On a purely private level, he no doubt would have preferred to ignore it and suffer such abuse for Christ's sake (cf. [1 Peter 2:20–23](#)).

1 Peter 2:20-23 (NASB)

²⁰“For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer *for it* you patiently endure it, this *finds* favor with God.

²¹For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps,

²²WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;

²³and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.”

But once again, out of concern for the Corinthians, he had no choice but to respond. For the truth's sake, he needed to defend his apostleship by exposing and opposing the false apostles' deceit. Otherwise, the Corinthians would be devoured by their false teaching.

How would Paul handle *this* attack without seeming self-aggrandizing or narcissistic? He certainly could not claim that they were wrong and he was really quite appealing. He couldn't write back and say, “Look, I just found three people who think I'm cute.” His physical infirmities were not news to him. In fact, no one knew his own weakness better than the apostle Paul. But, frankly, he was being criticized by people who were much more sinful and weak than he was. **How could he defend himself against such intensely personal vilification without appearing proud?**

He answered this attack exactly as he had already answered the false apostles' other criticisms: by **honestly** and **humbly** acknowledging his own **inherent insufficiency**. The gist of his reply is summed up in [2 Corinthians 12:9](#), “most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities.”

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NASB)

⁹“And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, **I will rather boast about my weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

It was, quite frankly, a matter of constant amazement to Paul himself that he was ever called to leadership to begin with. He told Timothy,

1 Timothy 1:12-13 (NASB)

¹²“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service,

¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.”

CH-110 LEADERSHIP 1

Dr. Eddie Idefonso

Lecture # 41



If the truth were told, he had to agree with his accusers' claims. In effect, he acknowledged that they were exactly right on this count. Everything they said about his human weaknesses was true. He wasn't attractive. He wasn't anything special.

But after all, he reminded the Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 4:5 (NASB)

⁵“For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake.”