

Apostle in the Crosshairs

Scripture Focus

2 Corinthians 10

Summary

This lesson points out that Paul's critics at Corinth accused him of being cowardly and weak. We learn in this lesson how he answered his critics' charges.

Topic

Handling criticism

Theme

God wants us to handle criticism in a godly and constructive manner.

Desired Learner Response

The learners will handle criticism in a God-honoring way.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 13

Outline

I. Paul Answered His Critics' First Charge (2 Cor. 10:1–7)

- A. Their charge of cowardliness (10:1, 2)
- B. Paul's defense (10:3–7)
 1. He did not walk after the flesh
 2. He did not want to be severe with all
 3. He cited his critics' bias

II. Paul Answered His Critics' Second Charge (2 Cor. 10:8–18)

- A. Their charge of weakness (10:8–10)
- B. Paul's defense (10:11–18)
 1. His critics would soon see his strength
 2. His critics unwisely commended themselves
 3. The Corinthians' faith commended Paul
 4. The Lord commended him

Memory Verses

*"But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.
For not he that commendeth himself is approved,
but whom the Lord commendeth" (2 Corinthians 10:17, 18).*

GETTING STARTED

Highly Criticized

Make the following statement: The more you serve the Lord, the more you will be criticized. Have those who agree with the statement line up on the left side of the classroom and those who disagree line up on the right side. Ask a few volunteers to defend their viewpoints.

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul dealt with his critics.

For Better or for Worse

ASK: Why is criticism easy to give but hard to take? (Q1)

ASK: How has criticism affected your life? Are you better or worse because of criticism? (Q2)

Criticism is part of ministry. Handling it well does not come naturally. Paul answered his critics in 2 Corinthians 10.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

The apostle Paul's critics in Corinth wrongly accused him of many things. In previous chapters Paul dealt with criticism and false charges. Chapter 10 discloses his replies to two more false charges. Both replies were necessary, because Paul needed to defend his apostolic authority for the sake of the Lord's work in Corinth.

I. Paul Answered His Critics' First Charge (2 Cor. 10:1–7)

The last major section of 2 Corinthians begins at verse 1 of chapter 10. Since the tone of this section differs from that of the previous sections, some critics of the Bible suggest that this section belongs to another book and was placed inadvertently in 2 Corinthians. However, they are mistaken. Throughout the preceding chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul defended his apostleship. In this final section of 2 Corinthians, he increased the intensity of his defense.

A. Their charge of cowardliness (10:1, 2)

Paul's critics said he was a coward (10:1) and implied they would have respected him if he had been assertive and aggressive among them. Paul, therefore, was forced to defend himself and use his apostolic authority, but he also wanted to follow the pattern of meekness exemplified in Christ.

Paul began his reply with a tone of authority. *I Paul myself*. Rarely did he identify himself by name in the middle of a letter, but he must have felt compelled to do so in 2 Corinthians. Yet he didn't do so in a belligerent manner. He entreated the Corinthians *by the meekness and gentleness of Christ*.

ASK: Do you find it hard, almost impossible, to be meek in the face of harsh criticism? If so, why? (Q3)

ASK: Under what circumstances might it be wise to respond assertively to your critics? (Q4) *When the Lord's honor or reputation is at stake, for example.*

TESTIMONY: Share a personal experience of being firm but meek.

The misconception that meekness and gentleness are incompatible with firmness was refuted in the Lord Jesus Christ. He spoke as one having authority, yet He was meek and mild. Paul followed this pattern.

In the second half of verse 1, we see that Paul was as capable of dealing firmly with critics in their presence as he was in his letter. He derived no pleasure from being severe, but he would deal severely with his critics if the situation demanded such action.

Paul's attackers charged that he *walked according to the flesh* (10:2). They failed to accept that his ministry was motivated by love for Christ, not by self-interest, and that it operated by the Spirit's guidance, not by carnal wisdom and energy. Unless they experienced a change of heart toward Paul, they would learn the hard way that he was indeed a genuine apostle.

B. Paul's defense (10:3-7)

Paul's defense against the charge that he was cowardly extends from verses 3 to 7, as he presented two reasons why he had not dealt sternly with his critics. But first he answered their charge that he walked after the flesh.

1. He did not walk after the flesh

He affirmed in verse 3 that he did not *war after the flesh*, that is, he did not conduct his warfare according to the flesh. Neither should we. We are engaged in a spiritual warfare and must fight it on a spiritual level, using spiritual weapons.

RESOURCE: Display resource 13. **ASK:** What carnal weapons might a believer use in ministry? (Q5) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *Cleverness, charm, and forceful personality.*

ASK: What will happen to the ministry of a Christian who relies on carnal weapons to carry out his or her ministry? (Q6) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *It will be superficial and unsuccessful.*

Using carnal weapons in ministry will not solve problems. It will just make them worse.

RESOURCE: Display resource 13. **READ:** Ephesians 6:11-18. **ASK:** What spiritual weapons are available to believers? (Q7) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *The whole armor of God as a defensive weapon and the Word of God and prayer as offensive weapons.*

ASK: What will happen to the ministry of a believer who relies on spiritual weapons to carry on his or her ministry? (Q8) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *It will be real and fruitful.*

Evil thoughts and actions that oppose the gospel are diametrically opposite



of the *knowledge of God* (2 Cor. 10:5). These thoughts and actions are hindrances and must be confronted and defeated. Paul chose to take captive the thoughts of mankind to bring them into the service of Jesus Christ.

2. He did not want to be severe with all

A second reason Paul was meek and mild with the Corinthians is that he did not want to be severe with all of them. Verse 6 seems hard to understand at first reading, but it seems Paul intended something like this: I am ready to punish anyone who remains insubordinate once your submission is complete. The point is that he could be stern if he wanted to, but he wanted to give the Corinthians an opportunity to voluntarily accept his apostolic authority. During his visit to Corinth, he would deal sternly with any who remained defiant.

3. He cited his critics' bias

Paul's third answer to the charge of cowardliness was that his critics judged things from a biased perspective. The first sentence of verse 7 may be a question, a command, or simply a statement. It seems best to take it as a statement of fact: Paul's critics judged matters solely based on their outward appearance. They had a biased, superficial view of Paul's apostleship. He pointed out that if they would look more deeply into the matter, they would realize he was a genuine apostle. Paul's opponents claimed to belong to Christ. Paul told the Corinthians to reassure themselves that he, too, belonged to Christ.

ASK: Why is it a sin for a person to think he has a special relationship with Christ that makes him better than everyone else? (Q9) *That belief is rooted in pride, which is a sin.*

ASK: Why is it a sin for a person to think he or she is deficient as a Christian and cannot measure up to everyone else? (Q10) *That belief is rooted in self-pity, which is a sin.*

II. Paul Answered His Critics' Second Charge (2 Cor. 10:8–18)

A. Their charge of weakness (10:8–10)

Paul wrote that even if he boasted a little too much of his authority, he would not be ashamed (10:8). Apparently, his opponents had accused him of boasting. But he was not ashamed to speak about his authority, because God had given it to him; it was not something he had taken upon himself.

READ: 2 Corinthians 10:8. **ASK:** What happens to a church whose pastor uses his authority to edify the believers? (Q11) *The believers grow spiritually, edify one another, and ultimately glorify God.*

ASK: What was not a reason for God's giving authority to Paul? (Q12) *For destruction of believers.*

God gave authority to Paul to build up the church, not to tear it down. In our churches today our pastors and other leaders have authority over us. Godly pas-

tors use this authority to edify members of the church just as Paul did.

In verses 9 and 10 we find the heart of the accusation brought against Paul. His opponents claimed that his letters were meant to *terrify* the church and were *weighty and powerful*, yet Paul's *bodily presence [was] weak, and his speech contemptible*. They charged, as mentioned in verse 1, that Paul could be strong as a lion when absent and writing letters, but weak as a coward when present. They also said his words were not worth listening to. How would you feel if opponents like Paul's opponents attacked you?

B. Paul's defense (10:11–18)

In the rest of the chapter, Paul defended himself against this second charge. His answer was fourfold.

1. His critics would soon see his strength

First, Paul answered that his critics would soon see his strength. He wrote in verse 11, *Such as we are in word by letters when we are absent, such will we be also in deed when we are present*. If his opponents thought his letters were terrifying, they would find him terrifying in person also. If they felt that his letters were firm and powerful, they would find him to be firm and powerful in person also. Paul intended to use his apostolic authority when he went to Corinth.

ASK: When have you found it necessary to be stern for the sake of the gospel? (Q13)

2. His critics unwisely commended themselves

Second, Paul answered that his critics unwisely commended themselves. He defended his boldness but showed that he was not as bold as his opponents: they were so bold that they rested their authority on self-recommendation. This kind of reckless boldness was foreign to the apostle Paul. Moreover, it was downright foolish.

ASK: What is the harm in using each other as a spiritual measuring stick? (Q14) *We use a false standard when we measure ourselves against others. We become satisfied with not being as bad as someone else. Consequently, we do not grow in Christlikeness.*

3. The Corinthians' faith commended Paul

Third, Paul answered that the Corinthians' faith commended him. His opponents had wrongly invaded a church. By God's grace Paul had founded the church in Corinth. He had won the Corinthians to the Lord. God had led him to Corinth. Paul had started the church in their city. He did not need to commend himself as his attackers commended themselves. The Corinthians' faith commended him.

Paul's critics moved in on Paul's work and took it over. They had little interest in starting something new. They wanted to boast in what someone else had accomplished (10:16). They wanted to be in charge of something big and noteworthy.

ASK: Why might it be wrong for believers to abandon or ignore a church plant to join a large church that has more to offer them? (Q15) *It would be wrong if the person's motives were selfish.*

4. The Lord commended him

Finally, the ultimate proof of Paul's apostolic authority came from the Lord Himself. The Lord commended Paul. That was all the approval Paul needed. Self-commendation means nothing, but commendation by the Lord means everything. Paul affirmed, *For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth* (10:18).

ASK: Read the following scenarios, and ask the learners to discuss how the person in each situation should respond to the criticism he or she is receiving.

(1) Pastor Goodman devotes more than sixty hours per week to the work of the ministry. He doesn't neglect any area of pastoral ministry, but a few malcontents in the congregation are severely criticizing him. Because the church's attendance isn't increasing as much as they think it should, they are spreading their opinion that Pastor Goodman is lazy. How should Pastor Goodman handle this criticism?

(2) Candice's mother wants her to excel in everything, from music to math and from cooking to grooming. Consequently, Candice's mother pushes her too hard, never allowing her any time for harmless teenage fun. Other parents have cautioned Candice's mother about pushing her daughter to exasperation and perhaps a nervous breakdown. Even Candice has asked her mother to stop being a *smother* and just be a mother. How should Candice's mother handle this criticism?

(3) A married couple, Joel and Tavia, are actively involved in the leadership of their church. They serve on several committees, often provide special music for the Sunday services, teach Sunday School, and entertain church groups in their home. Unfortunately, few church members accept positions of responsibility when they are available, but a number of church members are criticizing Joel and Tavia's service involvement. They charge that Joel and Tavia are running the church. How should Joel and Tavia handle this criticism?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Use the following activities to help your learners handle criticism.

Pushing on Past Criticism

ASK: How do you react when people criticize you for your service for the Lord? (Q16)

ASK: What steps can you take to ensure a proper response the next time you are criticized? (Q17)

Pastoral Support

ASK: How supportive have you been of your pastor? (Q18)

ASK: What can you do to show your pastor that you support his authority and edification ministry in the church? (Q19)

Summary and Memory Verses

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: By God’s grace I can handle criticism in a God-honoring way.

Encourage your learners to memorize 2 Corinthians 10:17 and 18. Give them an opportunity to quote the verses in class next week.

Waves of Grace	
By God's grace I can ...	7.
1.	8.
2.	9.
3.	10.
4.	11.
5.	12.
6.	13.

Abundant Grace

Topic

Personal testimony

Theme

A strong personal testimony is a strong defense of the truth.

Desired Learner Response

The learners will lead self-sacrificing lives.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 14

Bragging Rights

Scripture Focus

2 Corinthians 11

Summary

False religious teachers at Corinth rejected Paul's apostolic credentials but bragged about their own credentials. To counter their charges and safeguard the truth, Paul engaged in some bragging of his own. However, he prefaced it with the explanation that he was playing the role of a fool to make his point.

Outline

I. Paul's Life as a Defense (2 Cor. 11:1–12)

- A. Paul's jealous care (11:1–4)
- B. Paul's knowledge (11:5, 6)
- C. Paul's financial integrity (11:7–12)

II. Paul's Case against the Judaizers (2 Cor. 11:13–21)

- A. The Judaizers were false apostles (11:13–15)
- B. Paul's foolish boasting (11:16–18)
- C. The Judaizers were fools (11:19–21)

III. Paul's Testimony as an Apostle (2 Cor. 11:21–33)

- A. Paul's pedigree (11:21, 22)
- B. Paul's trials (11:23–33)

Memory Verse

*"I say again, Let no man think me a fool;
if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me,
that I may boast myself a little"
(2 Corinthians 11:16).*