

Whom Do You Trust? II Corinthians 11:1-30

Whom can you trust? In these days of smartphones and the internet it's easy to find information. You don't have to go to the library anymore, or look up the topic in your home encyclopedia. Now, you can just go online and instantly satisfy any curiosity you may have.

But here's the catch – how do you know that the information you find is reliable? After all, anyone can update an entry on Wikipedia, so how do you know what it says is accurate? And it's so easy to post any sort of information, or even a video on Facebook or YouTube – after all, I'm doing that very thing with this sermon. But so many of those opinions and ideas are mutually contradictory. I mean, I've seen articles swearing that vaccines cause autism, and other articles saying there's no connection between the two at all.

So, should you read the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times? Should you tune into CNN or Fox News? Should you listen to Nancy Pelosi or Donald Trump? How do we know which sources of information are truly trustworthy?

Well, the Ancient Greeks put great stock in how information was conveyed. They valued polished oratory, as we see in verse 6. And of course they were the ones who came up with epic poetry and live theater. To them, how you presented information was of great importance.

And we modern Americans aren't much different. Ever since the days of Will Rogers and Bob Hope, we've loved to hear clever comedians comment on current events. But today, many people are actually relying on the glib hosts of late-night talk shows to get their news. Yes, so enraptured are we with skilled communicators that we listen breathlessly to the opinions of actors and actresses as they espouse various causes, even though their primary skill is, by definition, making us believe things that are not true. No, we cannot deny that one of the big reasons we modern Americans trust what people say is the way that they say those things.

In contrast, Paul would have us focus on the content of his preaching, not its form. Yes, in verse 6 he admitted that he wasn't the best of speakers. But he also insisted that he was not at all deficient in his knowledge of the Scriptures. And to Paul, knowing the truth about Jesus was the most important thing. The product was more important than the packaging.

For what happens if we prefer style over substance? Verse 4 says the Corinthians were being deceived by slick talkers who were preaching a different gospel about a different Jesus. And the same thing happens all too often today, as the beautiful people, the great and the good campaign for the right to kill the unborn, and as preachers with shiny suits and elaborate TV studios promise relief from physical ailments in return for donations. If we care only about the presentation rather than what's on the plate we are likely to end up hungry.

Instead, Paul would have all of us embrace the truth, the simplicity that is in Christ, the good news that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But how do we gain this knowledge? The same place Paul found it, in the Bible alone. For it is "the Word of God, totally trustworthy, fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, the

supreme, final, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice,” as our ordination vows maintain.

And so we see that even in the internet age, even when so many contradictory opinions clamour for our attention, there’s one source of information we can always trust – the Holy Scriptures. And that means that whoever speaks in agreement with the Bible is worthy of our attention, regardless of how inartfully he might express himself.

Okay, so why else do we trust people? It’s not just because of the way they say things. Don’t we also tend to listen to people who are comfortable in their own skin, people who move easily in social situations? Aren’t good manners just as important as fluent speech where it comes to earning our trust?

Now, it’s true that what is considered proper behavior differs from place to place. In Mississippi we might look askance at someone who wears white shoes after Labor Day, while on certain college campuses it might be just as scandalous to wear animal fur or use plastic straws. But we all tend to trust the judgment of people who adhere to our own social conventions, don’t we? I mean, would you buy a used car from someone who puts sugar on his grits?

The Ancient Greeks were no different, and verse 7 reminds us that one of the ways they established and maintained friendships was by giving and receiving gifts. So, when Paul refused to accept financial support from the Corinthians during his ministry there, they found it offputting, even insulting. But that wasn’t the worst of it. To have their preacher, in their wealthy, cosmopolitan town welcome financial support from Macedonians, those backwoods hicks from the sticks, while he wouldn’t accept their own gifts? To have their preacher support himself by making tents? Paul may have known a lot about the Bible, but in the eyes of the Corinthians he was just tacky.

But just as Paul wanted the Corinthians to focus on the substance of his preaching instead of its style, he also wanted them to focus on his motivations rather than his social graces. For why did he say that he preached the gospel to them free of charge? He tells us in verse 9 that he didn’t want to be a burden to them. And that in turn was because of the love he had for them, a love that he expresses in verse 11. In short, he wasn’t trying to win them over through his socially acceptable behavior. Instead, he was completely focused on the Corinthians and their needs.

And what did Paul think was their greatest need? Not to be impressed by his speaking skills or his good manners, or really to be concerned with him at all. Instead, verse 2 says his greatest desire was that they would be holy, set apart from sin and set apart for Christ. The reason he preached the gospel to them was so that they would be as completely devoted to Jesus as a virgin bride is for her groom on their wedding day. That was Paul’s main concern, so good manners just didn’t matter so much to him.

And no matter how he may behave, a person’s motivations are still a good test for us to use today. We should trust people who care about us, those who really want what is best for us, not just those who make us feel comfortable, those who fit in with our social conventions. More specifically, if we have church leaders who know a lot about the Bible and who love us enough to speak its truths into our lives so that we might grow in holiness, we should be willing to listen to them, in spite of however awkward such advice might seem at the time.

Oh, but there’s one more reason we tend to trust people, especially here in the South. For in areas like this one where people have lived for generations, we tend to

value connections, don't we? And that means we trust people at least in part because we know their families. In Paul's time, the Jewish community did the same sort of thing, focusing on the sort of heritage and ancestry that we see mentioned in verse 22.

But connections are important for everyone, even if they aren't always defined genealogically. For we modern Americans have become quite polarized, separating ourselves into political factions which live in different places and rarely have anything to do with each other. The sad truth is that even though so much information and so many points of view are available to all of us on the internet, we tend to retreat into our own cultural enclaves, only interacting with people who already agree with us, only trusting those who belong to our own ideological tribe.

Now, in verse 22 Paul indicates that he could play the connections game as well as any other Jew of his era. But instead, he chose to boast about a different kind of connection – how close his own experience was to that of Christ Himself. For look at the amazing catalog he sets before our eyes starting in verse 23. Instead of boasting about his polished oratory, his impeccable manners, or his good breeding, he brags about how many times he was beaten and put in prison. In order to build his case for the Corinthians to trust him, he tells about the dangerous situations he put himself into. He reminds them of his lost sleep, his hunger and thirst.

And why was all this important? Of course such suffering proved Paul's sincerity – for no one would go through all that for the sake of a gospel he didn't really believe was true. Moreover, enduring such hardships clearly demonstrated that Paul wasn't preaching the gospel just for what he could get out of it. And being willing to go through all that suffering so that people could know about Jesus certainly underlined Paul's selfless motivations – his love for his church members, and his burning desire that they would grow in grace and holiness. Yes, I think we can see why Paul thought verses 23-29 were a more compelling resume than any of the polish and style the Corinthians thought were so important.

But there's one more reason that Paul wanted to highlight the suffering He had been willing to endure for the sake of Christ and for the people of God. For by going through such hardships, he was demonstrating his own connection, not to some Ancient Jewish tribe, and not to some socially prominent Greeks, but to Jesus Himself.

For how did Jesus seek to earn our trust? It wasn't because of His polished manners or his social prominence. After all, He was just a carpenter's son, born in a stable and raised in Galilee, as far from the center of Jewish society in Jerusalem as you could get. And even though Jesus became a rabbi, He hadn't been a student under any of the socially prominent teachers of the time. No, as Isaiah predicted in our responsive reading, He didn't have any form or beauty that made Him desirable. He didn't boast the sorts of credentials that so many ancient Corinthians and modern Americans find compelling.

Instead, Jesus earned our trust by bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows, just as Paul was burdened with the care of all the churches he had planted. Jesus was oppressed and afflicted, just as Paul was beaten and stoned and left for dead because he refused to deny that Jesus was the Messiah. But Jesus went much further than Paul ever did, earning our trust by taking on Himself the iniquity, the sin of all His people, allowing Himself to be beaten and bruised so that we might be made whole, dying as a perfect sacrifice so that all who trust in Him might live with Him forever.

So, in this world of so many competing truth claims, whom should we trust? Someone whose words are spoken, whose very life is lived in accordance with the Scriptures. Someone who loves us enough to suffer for us, always putting us ahead of himself. Someone whose greatest desire is our holiness. In short we should trust Jesus, and those whose lives reflect the presence of His Spirit, those who follow wherever He leads.