

ENGAGE

- The last section of 2 Corinthians has to do with Paul's defense of his ministry and the measure of godly leadership.
- (A description of Paul from The acts of Paul and Thecla; "A man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel")
- The character traits of authenticity over appearances and how one handles credit and praise is the focus of this week's message.

EXAMINE

4. (v. 7) The Corinthian Christians had a carnal reliance on outward appearances.

Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ's, even so we are Christ's.

a. *Do you look at things according to the outward appearance?* Paul diagnoses the problem with the Corinthian troublemakers. They are looking only at the outward appearances, and by outward appearances, Paul was weak and unimpressive.

i. By outward appearance, it seems Paul was indeed unimpressive. This is a description of Paul from an early Christian writing, perhaps from about the year 200: "A man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked." (Cited in Kruse) If this description of Paul is even remotely correct, he had nothing like magnetic good looks.

ii. "Since Paul excelled in none of those endowments which ordinarily win praise or reputation among the children of this world, he was despised as one of the common herd." (Calvin)

iii. But they knew Paul only on an outward, surface level. The people who criticized Paul and said that there were "two Pauls" – one reflected in his letters and one evident in person – really didn't know Paul except on a surface level.

b. *Just as he is Christ's, so we are Christ's:* Paul is saying, "If you claim to belong to Jesus, look at yourself. You may not be mighty in outward appearance, yet you belong to Jesus. Well, so we are Christ's as well."

i. None of us want to be judged on mere outward appearance. We often want people to see our heart. Yet the Corinthian Christians would not grant to Paul what they wanted for themselves.

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ii. Paul doesn't say that it is wrong to test an apostle's credentials but that the Corinthians used the wrong test. They judged only by outward appearance.

5. (8-11) Paul's view of his authority as an apostle.

For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed; lest I seem to terrify you by letters. "For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present.

a. *Even if I should boast somewhat more:* It seems that Paul is uncomfortable writing about his own authority. This is because he is a humble, godly man. He uses boast here in an exaggerated, almost sarcastic sense to show he would prefer not to talk about his own authority; it feels like "boasting" to him. Paul realizes how much better it would be if the Corinthian Christians would just recognize his authority so that he wouldn't have to boast somewhat more about it.

b. *Which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction:* Paul recognizes that Jesus grants authority in the church for one reason. He does it to build the body of believers up (edification), not to tear it down (destruction).

i. This is true of every level of authority God has granted. In the church, in the home, in the workplace, and in government, God has established levels of authority and submission. He did this to build up, not to destroy.

c. *Lest I seem to terrify you by letters.* "For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." Paul's despisers among the Corinthian Christians felt they had "evidence" against him. The "evidence" was that Paul seemed to be tough in his letters but weak and unimpressive in person. So they used this as "evidence" to despise him as weak and two-faced.

i. Their great mistake was in relying only on outward appearance. Paul's despisers said, "his bodily presence is weak," only looking at his appearance. They also said of Paul, "his speech [is] contemptible," hearing only the style and presentation of his sermons, not the message itself.

ii. Paul's humility and complete reliance on the power of God instead of the power of his own personality, coupled with his strong letters, were being used against him. They said Paul was like a dog that barks like crazy at a safe distance but is a coward when confronted face to face.

iii. From what we know of Paul's ministry in the book of Acts, it seems hard to understand why anyone would say of him, "his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." But Paul may have been quite ill during his time with the Corinthian Christians, and his condition may have made him appear this way.

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iv. At the same time, whether Paul's weakness in bodily presence and speaking ability was temporary or permanent, it didn't bother Paul. He knew that when he was weak, it gave God's power all the more opportunity to work.

d. *Let such a person consider this:* Paul writes to his despisers with perfect clarity. "If you want the 'tough' Paul, you will get him. I will come to you with all the authority I have shown in my letters." If the Corinthian Christians knew how serious Paul was, they would have received this as a solemn warning.

i. The troublemakers among the Corinthian Christians probably wanted a consistently gentle Paul, whom they felt they could freely despise and push around. However, if they would not change, they would get a consistent Paul – but a consistently severe Paul.

B. Wrong and right measures of ministry.

1. (12) The wrong measure of ministry.

For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

a. *We dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves:* Whoever Paul's opponents and critics were among the Corinthian Christians, they certainly thought highly of themselves. Paul will not class or compare himself with these carnal, worldly people at all.

i. There are many who are ready to commend themselves; most do not do it publicly but do it privately in their own minds. "They are also full of pride and self-conceit; they look within themselves for accomplishments which their self-love will soon find out; for to it real and fictitious are the same." (Clarke)

ii. "Oh, pray to be preserved from this perilous pinnacle of self-exaltation. Look into the perfect law of liberty, and draw nigh to God. The nearer we come to God, the more rottenness we find in our bones." (Trapp)

b. *Measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves:* This explains why Paul's carnal Corinthian critics could think so highly of themselves. In their worldly ways of thinking, they simply measured themselves by themselves and only compared themselves among themselves.

i. This means two things. First, it means making yourself the measure of others. Second, it means making others the measure of yourself.

ii. This was wrong for at least two reasons. First, there did not seem to be a lot of really spiritual people among the Corinthian Christians to give a good comparison to. How much of a compliment could it have been to be the most spiritual person among the Corinthians? Secondly, it was wrong

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because it only measured on a human scale, focused on outward appearance. When we let the Holy Spirit measure us through God's Word, He measures us on God's scale, and He looks at the heart.

iii. This needs to be communicated to pastors and church leaders today: Stop measuring yourself by yourselves. Stop comparing yourselves among yourselves. We should not make ourselves the measure of others, feeling we are superior to them if, by outward appearance, we are more successful. On the other side, we should not make others our measure, feeling we are failures if – by outward appearance – they are more successful.

c. *Are not wise*: This is a simple analysis of the Corinthian approach of measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves. It isn't wise. It isn't smart. It isn't of God.

2. (13-16) The right measure of ministry.

We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us; a sphere which especially includes you. For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men's labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment.

a. *Within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us*: Paul's authority in the church was not unlimited. God had granted him a sphere of authority, and that sphere included the Corinthian Christians, especially since he had founded that church (for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ).

i. The idea of the limits of the sphere comes from the lanes that were allotted for runners in a race. The Corinthians would recognize this because they loved races and held the famous Isthmian Games in Corinth. Paul is saying, "I'm running in my own lane and not in someone else's."

ii. All godly authority has a sphere. It is important for the person in authority to not exercise that authority outside the sphere, and it is important for the person under authority to recognize the sphere of authority they are under.

b. *As your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere*: As the Corinthian Christians grew in maturity and in outreach, their church would grow and plant many other churches. This would, by extension, enlarge Paul's sphere of authority.

c. *In other men's labors... not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment*: Why is Paul stressing the point that he has not, and will not, take authority in another man's sphere? Probably because that is exactly what his opponents among the Corinthian Christians did. They tried to boast in Paul's sphere of accomplishment.

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- i. Instead, Paul's passion was to preach the gospel in the regions beyond. He was not interested in building on another man's foundation, and did not want to horn in on someone else's sphere of authority.
- ii. "It is base, abominable, and deeply sinful, for a man to thrust himself into other men's labours, and by sowing doubtful disputations among a Christian people, distract and divide them, that he may get a party to himself... This is an evil that has prevailed much in all ages of the Church; there is at present much of it in the Christian world, and Christianity is disgraced by it." (Clarke)

3. (17-18) The importance of the Lord's commendation.

But "he who glories, let him glory in the LORD." For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

a., *He who glories, let him glory in the LORD*: By using this quotation from Jeremiah 9:24, Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians who found their glory either in Paul or against Paul. Paul sweeps all that away, showing we should not glory in ourselves, in another, or against another – we should only glory in the LORD.

- i. Perhaps Paul wanted to jog their minds to remember the context of his quotation from Jeremiah: Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24) The Corinthian Christians were the types to glory in wisdom, in might, and in riches, instead of glorying in the LORD.

- ii. The great thing about glorying in the LORD is that we can always do it. No one is so high that they cannot glory in the LORD. No one is so low that they cannot glory in the LORD. We can all glory in the LORD!

b. *For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends*: It doesn't matter how you testify about your own accomplishments. It is what God says about us that matters and will endure.

- i. Paul wanted the respect of the Corinthian Christians, but he wanted it for their sake, not his own. He knew they were hurting their own spiritual growth and maturity by rejecting him. But as for himself, Paul was satisfied with the approval that came from the Lord. This is the place where every Christian, and especially every person in ministry, must come to. It is a dangerous thing to commend one's self or to approve one's self.

- ii. "In the Christian Church, indeed, self-commendation should be viewed with suspicion as a mark of disqualification." (Hughes)

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QUESTIONS

- vs 7 How do you know you belong to Christ? (Extensively covered in 1John)
- How might we misevaluate people on the surface and have you ever done so?
- In what ways do we judge others based upon their appearance?
- What can we do about it?
- vs 8 How did Paul's view of authority - even his own - differ from that of the world?
- What do you make of Paul's comments in verse 8, taking into account all of the criticism he had received from the Corinthians?
- vs 12 If we are not to compare ourselves against one another, then upon what standard are we to evaluate ourselves?
- Read 2 Corinthians 10:12-18, who is Paul's measure of success in these verses?
- How do we measure our own success?
- vs 13-18 In what ways might Christians wrongly take credit for the work of others, or for work they have not done?
- What is your realm of responsibility? (And therefore of your authority)
- In verse 17 Paul quotes the prophet Jeremiah (read Jeremiah 9:23-24), why might Paul have wanted to remind the Corinthians of these verses?

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