

THE MEASURE OF A MINISTER

2 CORINTHIANS 10:7-18

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.

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.

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. 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.

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

Once a woman was sitting in the waiting room. It was her first appointment with a new dentist. She noticed on the wall, the dentist had mounted his diploma. Of course, it bore his full name - *a name she recognized*.

It was the name of a boy she remembered from High School. She actually had crush on *the dreamboat*.

She recalled him being tall, handsome, dark-haired. *Could this be the boy she'd absolutely adored?*

Well, her suspicion was quickly dismissed when the dentist entered the room. He was older - balding - had a little gray hair around the edges. His face was weathered, and there were age spots on his hands. This man was way too old to have been her classmate.

Yet she was still curious. So after the exam, she asked him, “*Did you happen to attend Jackson HS?*”

He said, “*Yes I did. I'm a proud Mustang.*”

She asked again, “*When did you graduate?*”

He replied, “*1975.*” She couldn't believe it. The woman shouted, “*You were in my class!*” To which the dentist answered, “*Really? What class did you teach?*”

And here's the moral of the story, be careful of making judgments based on appearance. *Especially when your judgments are based on the wrong criteria.*

And this is what was happening in the church at Corinth.

There were false teachers who came in, after Paul had left town. They were critical of him. They doubted and questioned Paul's stature as an apostle.

In their estimation Paul didn't **look** like an Apostle.

But they were using the wrong measurements. They were impressed by Greek culture and style. *They used the marks of worldly success to judge a man of God.*

Throughout the first nine chapters Paul has patiently explained his ministry - both his *methods* and *motives*.

He summarizes his approach in verse 1, "I am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ..." So far, he'd mustered a humble - diplomatic defense of his ministry. But in Chapter 10 his tone changes. He gets aggressive with his accusers.

Their criticisms were more than personal attacks; they were tainting his ministry, and casting doubt on the Gospel. It was time for Paul to take off the gloves.

Paul's call was legit! How dare these charlatans belittle God's work! In Chapters 10-13 Paul seeks to prove the genuineness of his ministry and its message.

In one way, Paul's critics were correct... He wasn't physically impressive; he didn't have an overwhelming persona; he wasn't Greece's greatest orator - yet, God demonstrated His strength through Paul's weakness.

God showed Himself strong on Paul's behalf.

Remember the story of Balaam and his donkey.

Balaam was a Babylonian wizard who was told by God not

to consort with the Moabites to curse God's people, Israel. Yet Balaam deliberately disobeyed...

He boarded his burro and headed to Moab.

Yet the burro was more obedient to God than its rider. Three times an angel blocked the donkey's path, and the burro swerved out of the way. Yet each time, rather than recognize his own sin, Balaam blamed the detour on the donkey. He beat the animal three times.

Finally, God pitied the burro and opened his mouth.

The beast of burden said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me three times?"

In essence, "*who's the real donkey here?*" Balaam himself was the cause of the crash, not the burro.

But in opening the donkey's mouth God sets a precedent for his servants... As Christians we're all called to be beasts of burden. We're God's servants.

God calls us to bear each other's burdens - but that doesn't mean we need to allow other people to mistreat us. There does come a time, as with Paul, when we need to be willing to defend ourselves.

Being *used* and being *abused* are not synonymous.

Paul loved the Corinthians. He would lay down his life to serve them - but Paul wasn't going to remain silent while they disparaged him and the ministry!

This is why Paul writes in verse 7, "Do you look at things according to the outward appearance?" The Corinthians were good at jumping to conclusions.

They would size a person up before they heard his heart or examined his character. *They did this to Paul.*

We need to be careful lest we do it to others...

For the twenty-one years our church has been in this building, on an almost daily basis someone drives down McDaniels Bridge Road and throws a beer bottle in the church yard. When we first moved here, our youth pastor, Jeff, was in charge of the grounds. That meant he was the guy who picked up the beer bottles.

When Jeff pulled in every morning he would collect the bottles, then dump them in his office trash can.

One Sunday, an usher named Roy pulled me aside and said he needed to talk to me about a serious issue. He whispered, "I think Pastor Jeff has a drinking problem. I keep finding beer bottles in his trash can."

Obviously, Roy jumped to a wrong conclusion, *which happens when you only examine the outward appearance*. At least Roy handled it appropriately. He came to the proper authorities. He didn't gossip, and spread rumors... *like the Corinthians did to Paul...*

Paul writes, "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."

Some of the Corinthians doubted that Paul was even a Christian. *Yet how could they question his salvation?*

Paul was the person who pioneered the Gospel in Corinth. He was the person who planted the church.

Paul led the Corinthians to Christ. Hey, if Paul isn't *in Christ*,

then neither are the Corinthians - since they were saved by the Gospel he embraced and preached.

Verse 8, "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."

The last thing Paul was into was self-promotion.

Throughout his letters, he shied away from anything that sounded like a boast. His goal was always to point people to Jesus, then get out of the spotlight. No lingering in the limelight. Paul never took bows for God.

Yet here, the Corinthians are forcing him to defend his God-given authority. *And he does so shamelessly.*

Paul said, rather than *misuse* his authority, he *used* it for the Corinthians' sake... Spiritual authority is a good thing when used appropriately. And this was how Paul rolled. Rather than bully the Corinthians, Paul built them up. His goal was to encourage, not exploit.

He built them up even by the letters he wrote.

Paul's critics accused him of writing with a poisonous pen... of authoring intimidating, terrifying letters, but those letters jarred his readers out of spiritual apathy.

He references them, verse 10, "For his letters," they say, "are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." His critics said Paul was mighty with a pen, but a wimp and tongue-tied in person... *There was some truth to these claims.*

A third century novel entitled, "*The Acts of Paul and Thekla*," gives an interesting description of Paul, "He was small in size with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, bald-headed, bow-legged, strongly built, full of grace, for at times he looked like a man and at times he had the face of an angel." In other words, you were impressed by his spiritual - not his physical traits.

Other traditions say that Paul spoke with a lisp. In a few weeks we'll talk about his weak and infected eyes.

As far as Paul's fleshly features were concerned he was less than impressive to *look at* or to *listen to*.

And this was as far as the false teachers could discern. They noted his *physicality*... not his *spirituality*.

I'll never forget a local radio station that we asked to air our radio program, *Chapter-By-Chapter*. They refused. The station manager didn't like my voice.

He said I didn't have a "radio quality" voice. I knew I had a radio face, but I figured my voice would be OK.

I didn't argue with the guy. I just didn't think it would limit God, *and it didn't!* God has used that short two minutes on over 300 stations all across the country.

And this is what the Corinthians were saying about Paul. His voice wasn't "radio quality." In fact, nothing about him - *that they could see* - was of earthly quality.

The critics in Corinth concluded that Paul just didn't have what it takes to be an effective Christian minister.

Remember, Corinth was an up-and-coming place - a boom town. It was a newer city - a prosperous city.

Corinth had a cool, younger vibe. It was an ancient Seattle - full of freshly-tattooed, shaggy-beard, girl-pants wearing, handbagged hipsters headed for Starbucks. This is what the Corinthians wanted in their pastors - ministers who were hip in the world's eyes.

The same is true for Christians today. We judge a pastor by his outward appearance. *Is he slick enough? Theatrical enough? Entertaining enough? Polished enough?* Like the Corinthians some people today want pastors with bling - it's all about flash and splash.

It's interesting, over the last thirty years the number of women musicians in US orchestras has increased by 500%. It's because of the screen used today in auditions. The instrumentalist is hidden from view.

The audition is protected from superficial prejudices.

Race, sex, appearance is all behind the screen. The judge's only criteria is the musical ability they hear.

And this is how a pastor should be judged. Not by his style, or appearance, or his speaking ability, but by the substance of his message. *Is it biblical? Is it truth? Is it Spirit-filled? Is it a timeless word in the nick of time?*

Warren Wiersbe writes of a pastor he once heard speak. He was eloquent, but void of biblical truth.

A friend next to him summed up the sermon with a verse - 1 Kings 19:11, "**the LORD was not in the wind.**"

Don't misunderstand, I believe in communicating the Gospel

as effectively and as appealing as possible. But **the look** is never more important than **the book**. It's not **the splash**, but **the Spirit** that causes eternal results.

Paul writes in verse 11, “**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.**” When Paul arrives he'll show them how bold he can be! “**You better watch out. You better not cry. Better not pout, I'm telling you why... Paul is coming to town.**” And once he gets there, he'll lower the boom.

The Corinthians will *wish* he had sent a letter.

Paul had been in the trenches. He had scars to prove his faith. His ministry had come at a cost.

He wasn't afraid of the armchair quarterbacks in Corinth. After facing beatings, and stonings, and riots - he wasn't backing down to a few critical bloggers.

Vs 12, “**For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves.**”

The false teachers in Corinth were always bragging about their ministries. According to them, they were more successful than Paul, *but by what measurement?*

Paul says, “***We don't compare ourselves with these other pastors. In our eyes they aren't the benchmark.***”

And I appreciate Paul's thinking... Over the years churches have moved into our community and made a splash by preaching an easy, feel-good Gospel. They use gimmicks and carnal appeals to fill the seats.

They even peel off some folks who on occasion visit Calvary... *a pastor can feel the pressure to compete.*

Recently, my out-of-town son told me he was looking for another church. He feels like the church he's been attending waters down the Scripture. The final straw was offering photos with Santa Claus after the service.

He said, *"Dad, their whole goal is just more people."*

When a church like that moves into our community, *I don't compare.* If people want a photo with Santa on Sunday they probably don't want what we offer. We'll just stick to *our* goal - God's people need God's Word.

Paul refused to compare himself to other ministries.

But this is the pastor's tendency - comparison is a big issue. One of the most difficult adjustments I had to make when I became a pastor was understanding that it's very difficult to measure your effectiveness.

Tangible criteria can be misleading. The Mormons have a lot of people, but they preach false doctrine. Noses and nickels aren't the best gauges for success.

Ministry isn't like a business where you can check sales, or profit margin - and monitor your progress.

Spiritual success is more elusive - it's harder to measure. At times you're not sure how you're doing. You can even do the right thing, and get mixed results.

A pastor can faithfully sow the seed of God's Word into hearts, but that's no guarantee how fruitful he'll be.

In Jesus' parable of the sower he teaches us to expect a

25% success rate... He says some seed just never takes root - other seed gets choked by the weeds - still some seed gets burned up by the sun...

Only a quarter of the seed actually takes root!

If your business is widgets you can measure... *how many you make - how fast you make them - how many you sale - at what price did you sale them...* There's a bottom line to measure - but that's not so in ministry.

In 1912, a medical missionary, Dr. William Leslie went to live and minister in a remote corner of the Congo. After 17 years he returned to the United States a discouraged man. He believed he had failed to make an impact for Christ. He died 9 years after his return.

But in 2010 a team of missionaries re-entered that part of the Congo, and made a surprising discovery.

They found a network of healthy Christian churches hidden like glittering diamonds in the dense jungle, along the Kwilu River, where Dr. Leslie was stationed.

Based on their research, the missionaries thought the Yansi people might've heard the name "Jesus" - but there was no way they could know much about Him.

They were totally unprepared for what they found.

They missionaries wrote, *"When we got in there, we found a network of reproducing churches throughout the jungle. Each village had its own gospel choir, although they wouldn't call it that. They wrote their own songs and would have sing-offs from village to village."*

The missionaries found a church in each of the eight

villages they visited over 34 miles. They also found a 1000-seat stone "cathedral" that got so crowded it spawned church plants in the surrounding villages.

As it turns out, 80 years earlier, William Leslie had traveled across this remote region, teaching the Bible.

Leslie had also started churches and schools.

For the seventeen years he was there, Leslie fought tropical illnesses, charging buffaloes, armies of ants, and leopard-infested jungles to bring the Gospel to the Yansi tribe of this remote area. And William Leslie died thinking that he had failed... *instead his faithfulness and courage left a living legacy of growing churches.*

Realize, so much of ministry happens below the surface - behind the scenes - where you can't see.

This is why you can't get discouraged witnessing to your friend, or teenager, or co-worker. Keep sowing seeds - you never know what's going on in their heart.

And notice verse 12, here's the big mistake we can make, **"But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."** Christians tend to measure themselves - or their church - against other Christians and other churches.

How many people come on Sunday? How big is the building? - or the budget? - or the staff? We compare against each other. According to Paul this is **"not wise!"**

Again, much of ministry defies measurement. You can't put a tape around it - or monitor it's pulse rate.

A pastor can be faithful to God's calling and to the 20 people God gives him - or he can be unfaithful in a church of 2000 people! *Ministry is about faithfulness.*

And the same is true of you. Don't make the mistake of measuring yourself and your relationship with God against what you see in other Christians... *"Well, look at how God is blessing her, what am I doing wrong?"*

Or *"I must be more righteous than he is, look at how he's suffering."* As Paul says these kinds of comparisons *"are not wise."* God has a unique plan for each of us. Don't *"compare yourself among yourself..."*

In a book by Peggy Noonan, the author describes an encounter she had with the CEO of a large corporation.

She writes, *"We're in his window-lined office, high in midtown Manhattan. The view - silver sky-scrapers stacked one against another, dense, fine-lined, sparkling in the sun - is so perfect, so theatrical..."*

The CEO tells me it is "annual report time" and he is looking forward to reading the reports of his competitors. I asked him, *"Why?"* I wondered what he looks for specifically when he reads the reports of the competition. He said he always flips to the back to see what the other CEOs got as part of their deal: corporate jets, private helicopters, whatever. *"We all do that,"* he said. *"We all want to see who has what."*

This was a talented and exceptional man, and I thought afterward he might, in an odd way, be telling me this about himself so I wouldn't be unduly impressed by him. Surely, he knows that what he does provides a livelihood for millions. I

thought: This man creates the jobs that create the world in which we live. And yet he can't help it, his mind is on the jet.”

And this isn't just true of the CEO in Manhattan, it's true of us all. *We measure ourselves by ourselves and compare ourselves among ourselves* - and we use the wrong criteria... It's always what's tangible and carnal.

Our eyes are on **the jet**... *or house, or car, or salary, or wife, or kids*... whereas, the life God has given you with all its unique challenges, and trials, and possibilities - is carving out for you an eternal destiny.

He's building character in you. God has eternal purposes for you. Faithfulness determines your reward.

What possible benefit is it to have your eyes on your neighbor's situation? You need to focus on God's will for you. As Jesus told His disciples in Luke 9:62, “**No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.**” Keep your eyes on your own field - plow your own rows... don't get distracted.

This was Paul's attitude, verse 13, “**We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us - a sphere which especially includes you.**” God has a sphere for each one of us. The will of God isn't all-encompassing.

God doesn't ask you to do it all, or go everywhere, or work nonstop. God's will has parameters, boundaries.

The Greek wording, “*within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us*” - draws on the picture of a runner in a race staying in his lane. The Corinthians understood this analogy.

They were sponsors of the famous Isthmian Games. A sprinter who stepped over the line into another runner's lane was disqualified.

Paul knew that God has given us all a lane in which we should run our race. We need to stay in our lane.

And it's up to you to figure out your God-given lane.

The word "*sphere*" can also mean "*portion*." God wants us all to identify what is *our portion* of the work.

To what place... in what task... for how long... have you been called? And what's in your sphere isn't necessarily in my sphere... Perhaps there's sickness, or trial, or hardship in your sphere that isn't included in mine, *or vice versa*. God deals to each of us a different hand. And it's up to us to play the hand we're dealt.

Paul knew the Corinthians were in his sphere. Notice he refers to His ministry as "*a sphere which especially includes you*." That must've meant a lot to the Corinthians, that a godly man like Paul considered them to be a special concern in his life and ministry.

They were in the Apostle's sphere. They were a planet in Paul's universe. He cared... *And this is how I feel about you. This church is especially my sphere.*

But what's your sphere? The place to which you're called - **the task** that you've been called to do - **the time** for which you're there -... *are you being faithful?*

Again, God measures successful ministry not by what gets done, but by how much of what God wanted you to do, gets done. Were you faithful in your sphere?

He adds, “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...”

Paul’s goal was to be faithful within the scope of what God gave him. *And that included the Corinthians.*

This wasn’t a stretch. Paul wasn’t overextending his authority to speak into the lives of these Corinthians.

He’d gone to Corinth with the Gospel - spent 18 months planting the church - written previous letters. *Who knew how many hours in prayer he’d invested.* Despite what the false teachers said, the Corinthians were in Paul’s heart. Corinth was *Paul’s parish!*

And when Paul came to Corinth, verse 15 tells us he was, “not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men’s labors...” Paul never took credit for what God did through someone else - *outside his sphere.*

Paul wasn’t a glory grabber. He refused to build on someone else’s ministry. He would never take what another man started, and use it to promote himself.

Years ago, we had a person who was holding a Bible Study for folks who came to Calvary Chapel - *but he had it in the back of his mind he could use the study to plant his own church.* Thankfully, he thought twice.

Had he gone through with it, he would’ve been building on another man’s labor - boasting of things outside his sphere. This is what Paul would never do.

Paul pioneered unreached areas... He went where no one

had gone before. He planted churches where there were no churches. And God blessed his efforts.

It reminds me of the great missionary to Africa, David Livingstone. He once received a letter from England, promising support, now that new roads had opened.

He replied, “If you have men who will only come if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all.”

Unexplored Africa was Livingstone's sphere of ministry. In fact, after Livingstone's death, the Africans he had converted to Christ didn't want to send his body back to England. In the end, they returned his body, and it was buried in Westminster Abbey - but they cut out his heart. They said, “His heart belonged in Africa.”

And Paul's heart belonged in Corinth. Though he would go elsewhere, the Corinthians would always be in his sphere of ministry. He longed for them to grow.

He says in verse 15-16, “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...” Paul's hope was to set sail for other lands with the Gospel. In Romans 15 he mentions “Spain” - whether he got there or not we don't know.

Yet Paul had a clear understanding of his sphere. He didn't just roam the Earth... he moved at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and followed a map drawn by God's will. And his first obligation was to the Corinthians, to see to it that they were established in their faith.

Verse 16 closes, “and not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment.” Again, Paul was careful not to boast in another person’s sphere of ministry. He didn’t want to take credit for someone else’s efforts.

The false teachers were the **glory robbers**, whereas Paul’s passion was to simply serve where God called!

Adam Clarke once wrote, “It is abominable, and deeply sinful, for a man to thrust himself into other men’s labors, and by sowing doubtful disputations among 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.” Sadly, his words were written around the year 1800. And it’s still happening...

Yet in verse 17 Paul exhorts us, “But **he who glories, let him glory in the LORD.**” Paul quotes **Jeremiah 9:24.**

Of course, the preceding verse says, “**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.**” Isn’t it amazing how little things have changed in the last 2500 years, since the days of Jeremiah...

We’re still proud of our *wisdom, strength, and riches.*

We glory in mind, and muscles, and money. We earn our degrees, and sculpt our bodies, and flaunt our wealth. Yet Jeremiah warns, “**glory not**” in these things.

Instead, the prophet tells us, “**Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord...**”

Wisdom, might, and riches are okay, but it's the knowledge of God that's most important.

1 John 2:17 puts it into perspective, “**The world is passing away.**” The best education becomes outdated. Muscles shrivel. Money vanishes... That means boasting in wisdom, might, or riches is an empty boast.

If you want something of real value - something really worth taking pride in - as Paul puts it, “**he who glories, let him glory in the Lord...**” In this chapter on ministry Paul admits the real reason to boast has more to do with *knowing God* than it does with *serving God*.

Serving is a privilege. But knowing is a pleasure.

Recall Martha served Jesus frantically, while Mary just sat at His feet and spent time in His presence - and Jesus said, “**Mary has chosen that good part.**”

Just knowing Jesus is the greater reward.

Chapter 10 closes, “**For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.**”

I love this verse... Christian musicians can win the Dove award... Evangelical publishers bestow their book awards... Pastors can pat each other on the back, and give out “*pastor of the year*” awards...

We can boast in our accomplishments... But all that really matters is to stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, and hear, “**Well done good and faithful servant.**”

Here is the ultimate measurement of ministry success... “**Not he who commends himself, but whom the Lord commends.**” That's what really matters!